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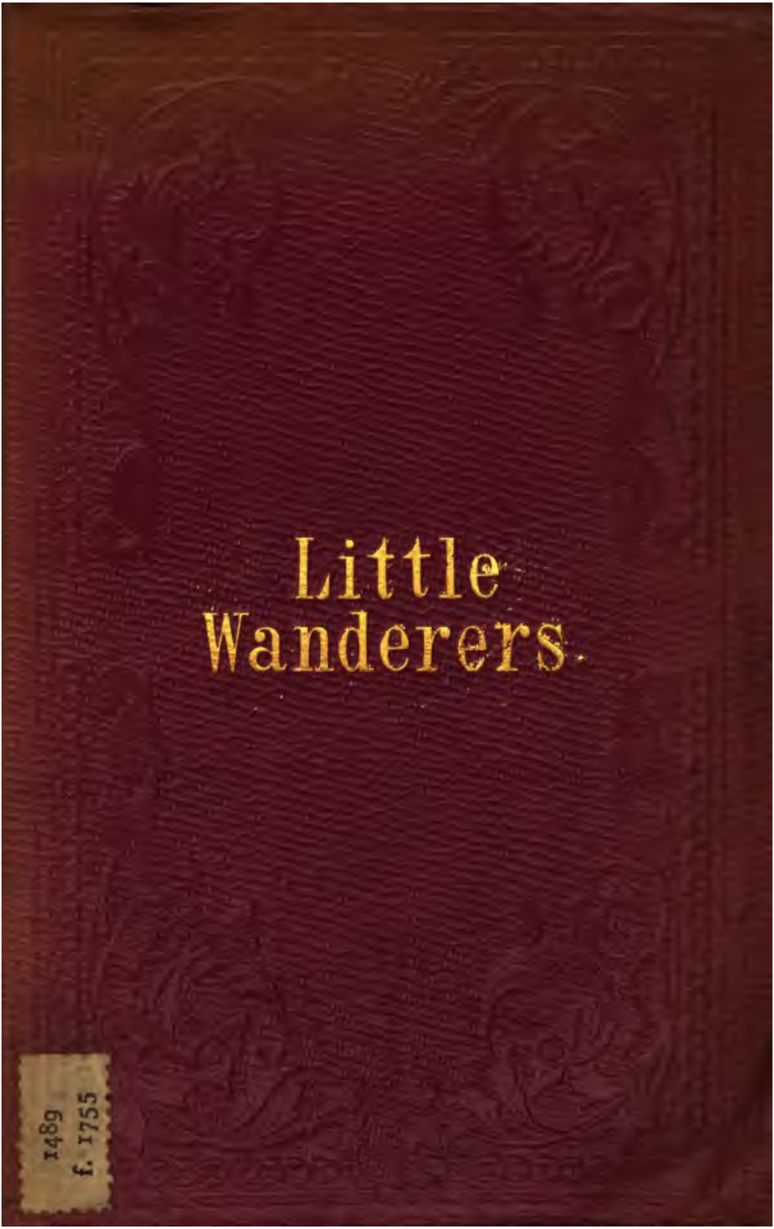

Little Wanderers.

1489 f. 1755

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THE

LITTLE WANDERERS.

A Swiss Tale.

BY

MISS E. M. STEWART,

AUTHORESS OF "LORD DACRE OF GILSLAND," "RIVAL ROSES,"
"LONDON CITY TALES," "LILIAS DAVENANT," ETC.

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THE LITTLE WANDERERS.

CHAPTER I.

A GREAT many years ago, there lived in a pretty village of Switzerland a little boy and girl, whose names were Conrad and Gertrude. They had no relations that they knew of in the world, nor any friends, save their nurse, who had brought them up, and the good people of the village. In spite of this, they were very happy, for they loved each other, and loved their nurse very dearly, and were both so good-tempered and obliging, that they were themselves loved by all the inhabitants of the hamlet, which did not consist of more than perhaps a dozen houses, nestled in the green bosom of a valley in the district of Mount St. Gothard.

The real wants of this life are very few, and the simple but hardy inhabitants of Niederwahl—the name of the village—sat down to their frugal meals, and wore their plain clothing, with a satisfaction which silken robes and luxurious tables very seldom give. As for their occupations, the men, for the most part, pursued the dangerous employment of hunting either the nimble-footed chamois goat, as it leaped from crag to crag, or the fierce bear, whose den was in the caverns of the rocks, and whose subsistence was in the thick woods that skirted the base of the mountains. In the summer time, too, they fished in the lakes and streams that abounded in the valleys, or pastured a few sheep on the grassy slopes. The women, on their part, were not idle: they spun their own and their husbands' woollen garments, and dressed the soft skin of the chamois for sale; they salted and preserved the bear's meat, and made cheeses from the goat's milk.

In all these feminine occupations, the nurse, Dame Lucilla, bore a part; but amid them she found time for other duties, in the exercise of which she displayed accomplishments unknown in the hamlet of Niederwahl, and uncommon in spots far less sequestered than a village of Switzerland a hundred years ago, for Dame Lucilla could actually read and write.

The nurse was herself a native of Niederwahl, but taking service in the great city of Berne in her youth, she became the wife of the favourite attendant of a German nobleman; and accompanied her husband to Wurtemberg, which was at that period only a duchy and electorate. Many years elapsed, and then Lucilla returned to her native village, a middle-aged, sorrow-stricken woman, and a widow. She was accompanied by two children—Conrad, then about four years old, and Gertrude, a year younger. She said the children were not her own, but gave no account of their parentage, which might perhaps have been judged to be attended with some mournful mystery, so sad and anxious were the looks with which she would oftentimes regard them. The honest and true-hearted dwellers at Niederwahl, however, indulged neither curiosity nor suspicion; those unamiable emotions are born of the luxury and deceit of great towns. The children were innocent and engaging, and Lucilla was their countrywoman, and unhappy. She had lost her husband, and had no male relation to assist her with the spoils of the chase: the only thought, therefore, of the good villagers, was how they should help and console her; and oftentimes was the choicest portion of the game, or the first cheese from the dairy, forced on the acceptance of Lucilla. When we render services to the world at large, we ought to look for no reward on earth beyond the consciousness of having performed our duty; but deeds of kindness rendered to virtuous people have a seven-fold reward.

Lucilla had not fixed her abode in her native village to be in any way a burden to its honest inhabitants; and not only did she soon acquire skill in those domestic arts of the women of the valley, which she had not practised since her youth, but from some slight knowledge which she possessed of medicine, directed by her excellent judgment, became in a manner the surgeon and physician of the village, as she was also its chief spiritual adviser; for neither church nor chapel was within reach of that secluded spot, which was only occasionally visited by a wandering friar.

Meanwhile, time rolled on its everlasting course; Gertrude had entered her twelfth year, and Conrad was nearly thirteen. Though originally of somewhat delicate frame, their free mountain life had endowed Conrad with a strength and activity equal to that of the active lads of the district, and spread the cheeks of his sister with the brightest hues of health. Steady of brain, and firm of foot, he could pursue the chamois from height to height, leaping the dark chasms, or treading the slippery verge of the precipice, where it scarce seemed to afford a resting-place for the human foot. Once, too, unknown to Dame Lucilla, he had joined a party of hunters in quest of a large and fierce bear, which was tracked to its haunt and slain; and though Conrad owned, when the huge carcase of the brute was borne in triumph to the village, that he had ventured to join in the chase, he left it to the athletic young mountaineer who had speared the bear to tell how, but for the noble courage of the boy, who had boldly approached the bear, and plunged his long knife into his heart, he must himself have been borne down by the creature's weight ere any of his companions could have approached to aid him.

The attainments of Conrad, however, were not confined to the courage and skill of an alpine hunter. Naturally a woman of fine abilities, and a great favourite with her employers, Lucilla, during the years of her absence from her native hamlet, had acquired not only the arts of reading and writing, but a purity of speaking both French and German, which might not have misbecome the polished society of Paris or Dresden; and this valuable acquirement Lucilla was at pains to impart to her young charge. The simple inhabitants of the valley held Lucilla in too much respect to question any part of her conduct; but one aged woman, who had nursed Lucilla herself, not being exempt, even in her seclusion, from that curiosity which is said to be the especial failing of the daughters of Eve, ventured to ask Lucilla for what reason she was so desirous to impart book-learning to her foster-children.

Lucilla sighed, and evaded the question; but, as the tears rose in her eyes as she spoke, and she presently fell into a fit of deep musing, the old peasant woman forthwith determined that there was some strange mystery attached to Conrad and his sister, in which food for conjecture she perhaps found more satisfaction than she would have derived from any explanations of Lucilla.

There is a certain grace and refinement in the simplicity of nature—among the inhabitants of great towns are found the essentially vulgar and ill-bred; thus living among the free and noble peasants of the Swiss valley, with their active health, their pure morals, and their minds ripening under the wise and gentle teaching of Dame Lucilla, Conrad and Gertrude, happy in their humble sphere, would have given a new grace to the highest. "God chasteneth those whom he loves." But He also, we are told by the same divine authority, "tempers the wind to the shorn lamb."

The bitter cup of affliction, that wholesome but unsavoury draught, was preparing for the lips of those poor children.

It was the commencement of an unusually fine and early spring, in the year 17—; the purple saxifrage, the Alpine heaths, and the early primrose, bloomed in the grassy nooks of the valley; cascades leaped forth, sparkling from the dark pine woods, now clothed with a fresher green; and the shepherd, who had kept his flocks safely penned during the storms of the long winter, led them forth to feed upon the tender and aromatic herbage. While the fragrant breath of spring, however, called forth the forms of beauty and brightness in the sheltered valley and on the mountain's pine-clad brow, the frame of the good and gentle Dame Lucilla began to droop and decline. Her own simple remedies, and the medicaments of a kind of travelling practitioner, who occasionally visited Niederwahl, alike failed to relieve her pain, or restore her failing appetite, which the good wives of the village in vain endeavoured to tempt with the little dainties of the poultry-coop or dairy. It was a warm, bright morning, and, after a sleepless night, Lucilla was sitting near the open casement of her cottage, propped up in a kind of easy-chair, fabricated by Conrad, with the assistance of the peasant lads, of pine wood and goat-skins. A balmy freshness was on the air, as it swept past laden with the perfumes of the wild thyme and wood violet, and the poor invalid drew her breath less heavily as she inhaled it. The two children stood by, regarding her with anxious looks, for they had overheard ominous whispers from the matrons of the village, and they knew what death was; they had seen Dame Bertha's pretty pale baby sprinkled with wild flowers, and laid in its little grave. Father Maurice, too, the oldest man in the village, who used to be so merry and kind, and had always some pleasant story for them of his young days—him too they had beheld stretched out so moveless and silent, with that solemn look upon his features; and as they stood beside their dear nurse, they began to weep, seeing how very ill she was, for they feared that they were about to lose her—that she would die.

Poor Lucilla!—her own tears fell as she thought how lonely her dear children would soon be, knowing as she did, from the mystery locked up in her heart, that the life of the poor peasants in that secluded valley was not for them to lead; that but for the wicked intrigues of bad men, they would have been dwelling in a great and rich city, with all the advantages of education which wealth and rank confer. It is very hard sometimes for poor human beings to drain the bitter cup, and in the midst of afflictions to say, "Thy will be done." But Lucilla had a rational and steady piety, and, folding her thin hands upon her bosom, while the tears, in spite of all, stole from beneath her closed eyelids, she silently commended her foster-children to Him who is the Father of the fatherless, and prayed for strength herself to bear their parting, and to make an important revelation, which, in her precarious state, she felt it would be improper longer to defer.

"My dear Conrad," she then said, as she looked up and drew a painful breath, "I am, as you see, very ill; and it may, perhaps, please God soon to take me from you. I would fain have stayed with you a little longer, the more so that a time is coming when you must leave Niederwahl. Had it been the will of Heaven that I should keep my health and strength, I should this summer have set out with you and Gertrude on a long journey. Alas! it is willed that I should undertake a much longer and a lonely journey."

Lucilla paused, faint for want of breath, and motioned for Gertrude to hand her a cup with medicated drink, a small quantity of which revived her, and she resumed, with more apparent strength.

"You remember, my children, that last autumn I was obliged to leave you under the care of Dame Bertha while I visited Altdorf. I there learned the death of a person who was a great enemy of your parents, and who, while he lived, was your enemy also. This man died without any heirs to the wealth of which he wickedly robbed your father and mother, and to which you, my dear children, have now a right. The justice of Heaven, which after many years has punished a bad man, will, I trust, restore you to your own; and that you may be as generous and gentle amid pomp and riches as you have ever been in the humble valley of Niederwahl, is the last prayer of your poor nurse."

Lucilla was again compelled to pause, while the children stood by her, awestruck and tearful, thinking, in their innocence and affection, nothing of the riches she spoke of, and all of the terrible prospect of losing her. Once more Lucilla revived, and bade them bring her a small casket that stood upon a shelf, and which had often been the subject of their wonder and admiration, for it was composed of ebony inlaid with gold, and was about the most costly article that had ever found its way into the hamlet of Niederwahl. But if the casket itself had excited their surprise, what was their astonishment when Lucilla drew from it a couple of miniatures, portraying a cavalier and lady in the prime of youth, and richly set in diamonds. Round the necks of the children she hung these pictures—the pictures of their parents—first showing them how the back of each miniature would open, and discover a narrow strip of parchment concealed within, inscribed with characters in some unknown language, which she said was Latin. From those portraits she told them they must never part; and, in addition to the picture of his mother, which she gave to Conrad, to the same ribbon that supported the miniature she attached a little silken bag containing a letter addressed to Father Friedrich Werner, the priest of a small chapel dedicated to St. Alice, near Altdorf, for which town she said that Dame Bertha's husband, Wilhelm, had promised to set out with them on the morrow.

At this announcement both the children burst into sobs, exclaiming, "Oh, dear nurse, do not send us away from you now that you are so ill; let us stay but a little longer, you may perhaps get better."

Lucilla pressed them to her heart and wept over them, for they were very dear to her.

"My brave Conrad," she said, "my darling little Gertrude, I shall have more chance to get well again if I know you are under the charge of some one who is better able to protect you than I am. Mr. Werner is a learned and pious priest, who knew your father, and can do much for you, which would not be in the ability of your poor nurse. Our friend Wilhelm will leave you at his house, and he will take you from there to Stutgard, where your mother was born."

"That must be a long, long way off, nurse!" said little Gertrude. "Oh, you must not send us there yet; we should be sure never to see you again."

"It was there you were born, my children," returned Lucilla, smiling faintly, "and there you will probably live, and be a great lady, and Conrad a brave cavalier!"

"I do not want to be a lady, nurse," sobbed Gertrude; "I want to stay with you."

"And I would rather stay in the valley and be a brave hunter!" cried Conrad. "What do we want with riches and fine things? I can hunt the chamois already, as well as Rupert, who is eighteen; and I shall soon be strong enough to join the bear-hunters, and keep both you and Gertrude, and take care of you both."

"My dear boy," answered Lucilla, "it is the will of Heaven to appoint our duties according to the station in which we are born. In every condition of life, as I have often told you, we may be honest and good; but we must not lay aside the duties to which we are appointed, to take up with others, merely because they are more agreeable to ourselves."

"Let us stay with you then a little longer," said the boy. "Do not, dear nurse, send us away to-morrow."

"Well, then, not to-morrow," answered Lucilla;

"and see, here comes Dame Bertha to sit with me, and I wish to talk with her; and while she is here, you and Gertrude can go and fetch me some of those early strawberries you saw yesterday."

Thus bidden, the two children left the cottage, hand in hand, provided with an osier basket to carry the fruit, and somewhat consoled in their grief by Lucilla's promise that she would not immediately send them to Altdorf.

"Nay, but you must cheer up, Lucilla!" said Bertha, as the poor sick woman wrung her hands and wept; "you may get better yet, and Wilhelm will take as much care of the dear children on the journey as if they were his own."

"I do not doubt that, my kind Bertha," answered Lucilla, "and I blame myself that I did not sooner entrust you and your good husband with the particulars of these poor children's birth. If any accident should happen, if Mr. Werner should be absent from Altdorf, Conrad has a letter which must be sent to Stutgard; it is there the relations of the mother of the children live. Their father, the Austrian Count —"

Lucilla suddenly stopped speaking, and an awful expression came over her countenance, as the words died upon her lips, and her eye grew fixed and glassy. The terrified Bertha called in vain for assistance, none were within hearing, and she could not leave the poor Lucilla, who now grasped her hand with the convulsive energy of death. The tears of the kind-hearted Bertha fell fast on the face of the dying woman; perhaps she was conscious of that tender sympathy, for Bertha fancied, as the violence of the convulsion abated, that there was a pressure of friendly recognition from the clammy hand, and that a smile flitted across the pale lips. The next moment the features became fixed, the grasp relaxed, and the poor children had lost the best and truest friend that God had given them.

An hour later, and Lucilla was laid out upon her humble pallet, looking like one "not dead, but sleeping," so serene was the expression of her pale countenance. By the side of the corpse, with her husband and neighbours, stood Dame Bertha, weeping. The children were still absent; the strawberries had been gathered from the spot where they had seen them, and they had gone further into the mountains in search of more.

CHAPTER II.

Grief, by the gracious goodness of Heaven, is not the heritage of childhood; the sorrows of the young quickly pass away. Gladdened by the promise of Lucilla, that she would not immediately send them to Altdorf, Conrad and his little sister, ere they had proceeded half a mile from Niederwahl, had settled that their dear nurse would soon get well again, and either continue to live happily with them in the valley, or go with them to Stutgard, where, if they were to be so great and rich, they would make her great and rich also. Once, too, when they sat down to rest, they drew forth the miniatures. They had never seen any pictures before save of the rudest kind, and they gazed with a kind of fascination on the noble features of the cavalier and the sweet countenance of the lady, so pensive, with its dark-blue eyes and wavy brown hair. The diamonds which set these pictures, the two children thought to be but spars, such as they had found in the rocks.

"You will be like this picture when you are a woman, Gertrude," said Conrad; "it looks like you when you are sad, as you were just now, crying about dear nurse."

"And the picture of the gentleman is as much like you, Conrad," answered the girl. "And so, these are our father and mother. I wonder if they are still alive; Lucilla did not tell us that, and why they sent us away from them. I do not remember them, Conrad; do you?"

"Well, I think I do remember something like a dream before we came to Niederwahl," answered Conrad; "but quite different to our valley, big houses everywhere, no mountains, or trees, or streams, or anything pretty and pleasant, such as we have in the valley!"

The strawberries, as before observed, had been gathered from the spot where the children had seen them the day before, which indeed was the foot of the valley of Niederwahl, which was a mere nook embosomed in mountains, whose sides were dark with pine woods, and their summits crowned with eternal snows. The little village was built in the very shadow of one of these stupendous mountains, which sheltered it from the bitter winds of winter; while its southern aspect, and the pure waters of a brook, which had its rise in the mountains, and took its course through the entire length of the valley, rendered it as fertile and pleasant in summer as it was sheltered and warm in the winter.

The past winter had, however, been unusually severe, even for the climate of Switzerland; the mighty cascades had been arrested in their course, and hung like huge columns of ice from the brows of the mountains, while in the clefts of the rocks the snow was collected in enormous masses, lying many feet deep even on the surface of the glaciers—

those immense fields of ice which are the characteristic of the high Alps. This severe winter had been succeeded by a warm and sudden spring, a spring that had for some days brought with it rather the close and glaring heats of summer than its own mild temperature. The poor Swiss peasants were somewhat alarmed at this sudden change, for they knew that it might subject them to the visitation of the terrible avalanche, which the convulsed elements would be sure to dislodge, did any storm occur. The avalanche is an immense mass of snow collected in the rifts, or on the summit of the mountains, which, loosened either by the tempests or by partial melting, falls into the valleys with terrific violence, sweeping to destruction everything that it encounters, and sometimes overwhelming whole villages.

Meanwhile, the children finding, to their great disappointment, that the strawberries were all gone, and thinking that their dear nurse greatly desired some, set out in quest of them; the poor Lucilla, however, had only mentioned the fruit as an excuse for sending the children away, while she imparted further particulars respecting them to Bertha.

Imperceptibly, Gertrude and her brother proceeded a considerable distance from Niederwahl, ere they found berries as fine as those which had ripened so early in that little sunny spot in their own valley: thus it was near noon when they paused in a wooded hollow of the mountains, startled to find how close the air had grown, and how very dark the sky. Those mountain-bred children knew well the signs of the elements; they knew by the dead silence of the woods, by the birds scudding with rapid wing to their nests, by the lurid tinge which fell alike upon the bare rocks and the pine forests, as though the sun had been changed into an immense globe of copper, by the falling of the wind, so that not a leaf was stirred upon the mountain side—by all these signs they knew that there was about to be a terrible storm, ere they heard the first distant mutter of the thunder, or felt the first large drops of rain that plashed through the thick boughs of the forest. Such tempests are very frequent in a mountainous region, and neither Conrad nor Gertrude felt any silly, childish fears; but they both knew that the woods were unsafe, and as the blue lightning flashed round them, and the thunder roared like cannon among the mountains, they looked about and found a cavern of the rocks, into which they crept for shelter. The storm was the most dreadful that either Conrad or Gertrude remembered; swelled by the rain, the mountain torrents burst from their accustomed bounds, and as the two children looked fearfully forth from their sheltered nook, a deep and strong river seemed rushing along the valley beneath them. Long and vivid flashes of lightning glittered in livid radiance over the wild scene, and made the inky blackness of the sky that succeeded its glare yet more awful by the contrast, while the firm-rooted rocks appeared to shake as they echoed to the pealing thunder. Conrad and Gertrude were indeed frightened; they knew not how long the tempest might last, perhaps for some hours, nor how they should make their way home when it abated, for though they were not above two or three miles from Niederwahl, the distance was trebled by the nature of the route, over rocks now slippery with the rain, and through valleys where the waters now flowed to a dangerous depth. Poor little Gertrude shed tears as she clung to her brother, and asked in timid accents how they should get home; and though Conrad tried to encourage her, and assured her that all would be well, yet he too turned pale, and clasped her convulsively, as a booming terrible sound passed over the mountains, louder than the thunder, which seemed to retire, as it were, rumbling and muttering in the distance, while the mountains and woods a thousand times re-echoed that dreadful noise. The two children looked aghast at each other; then a pale fitful gleam of the lightning quivered athwart the sky, and the low and distant voice of the thunder was succeeded by a silence unbroken, save by the rushing of the waters, and the waving of the pine woods in the rising wind. Pale and trembling, the young brother and sister still clung to each other; and it was in a tone as if the sound of his own voice terrified him, that Conrad at last exclaimed:

"Oh, Gertrude, an avalanche has fallen!"

The little girl made no answer, but as she looked out with her brother from the mouth of the cavern, her eyes, as well as his, turned anxiously in the direction of Niederwahl, for they both remembered that a fearful quantity of snow had been deposited during the past winter in the clefts, and on the summits of the mountains that overhung the valley. They knew, too, that, except themselves, scarce an inhabitant of Niederwahl was absent from the hamlet, and their poor hearts throbbed with anguish, not only in behalf of Lucilla, but for all their dear friends of the valley, as they whispered to each other their fears that there the avalanche had fallen. Poor children, for the first time they tasted of one of the most cruel trials of life, the misery and tortures of suspense; for the first time they were called upon to exercise that patience, which is at once a virtue and a consolation. There was nothing but patience! Even little Gertrude who, when the storm lulled as suddenly as it had risen, proposed immediately to essay their return to the valley, drooped her head sadly on her brother's shoulder, and submitted when he pointed to the deep waters in the valley already subsiding to a narrower current, so that it might be hoped that in a few hours a margin might be left along which they could venture. Very wearily the day waned for the two children, the tempest passed away, and the sun shone forth in his radiance, the birds flew twittering from their nests, a brighter green was in the woods, on the tall pine and the feathery larch, with the rain drops sparkling like diamonds amid their verdure; a fresher perfume rose from the aromatic herbs and heath-flowers, that spread like a carpet round their roots; but there were Conrad and his sister compelled to sit for hour after hour watching the slow ebb of the current in the valley.

The sun was sinking with a golden glory in the west, and the shadow of the rocks began to fall darkly on the waters below; but on either side of those waters now appeared a broken line of solid ground, sometimes presenting only the bare, barren surface of the rocks, at others, a safer and more agreeable footing in the carpet of dank moss. For the twentieth time, Conrad dropped from point to point of the rocks, and now he hailed his sister with the joyful news that they might venture on the way home.

The lithe and sure-footed little mountain-maid, grasping at the roots and lichens, and swinging herself down the crags, had no difficulty in reaching the spot where her brother stood. Arrived on the ledge of rock where Conrad was, the course became more dangerous, for the rock was slippery, and the water in the centre of the narrow gorge very deep. On their little excursion in search of the strawberries, Conrad had neglected to bring with him the iron-shod staff, with which the peasants secure their footing in those mountainous countries; but with the sharp knife which he always carried about him he had provided himself with a very tolerable substitute in a branch of a pine sapling, and with the end of his sister's girdle fastened to his own by which she held, and steadying his steps with the pine staff, he crept cautiously along the side of the mountain.

Everywhere, as the children advanced, they encountered some evidence of the fearful violence of the late storm; huge fragments of rock, struck from the pinnacles above, gloomed through the surging waters; branches of trees and the dead bodies of birds and animals floated on their surface; and so slow and laborious was the progress of the two children, that the sun had quite sunk, and the pale rays of the moon silvered the rocks and woods and trembled on the waters, ere they came in sight of the land-marks that betokened the neighbourhood of the valley of Niederwahl.

"There!" exclaimed Conrad, pausing for breath at the end of the dangerous defile, and sitting down on the broad breast of a mountain that sloped gently towards the valley of Niederwahl—"there is the old dwarf pine that grows so oddly out of the cleft in the rocks, and was blighted by the lightning five years ago; there it is still, Gertrude, the droll, sapless old trunk, with its naked arms stretched out. Poor Father Maurice! he used, in his soldier talk, to say that it was the advanced guard of the valley of Niederwahl. How clear the sky is now, and how bright the moon shines, that we can see the poor ugly old tree at this distance."

"Hush!" cried Gertrude, laying her hand on her brother's arm; and at the same moment a doleful sound passed on the wind, the long melancholy howl of some deep-mouthed watch-dog. The two children listened anxiously, and after a minute's pause, the dismal cry rose again upon the wind.

"What can be the matter?" said Gertrude, trembling. "That is Wilhelm's dog Wolf; I know his voice!"

"Something must be the matter, indeed," returned Conrad, anxiously. "Wolf has never howled like that since the night when his master fell from the rocks and broke his arm. Come, Gertrude dear, if you are not too tired, we will make haste home!"

The little girl rose from the turf, where she had wearily seated herself, and followed her brother, with what haste she could, over the broken and rugged ground. At intervals the melancholy wailing of the dog was again heard, rising above the whisper of the mountain gale, and the hoarse, croaking note of three or four ravens, that kept circling over the children's heads. When they reached the foot of the mountain, Gertrude began to cry. "Oh, Conrad!" she said, "I am sure that something terrible has happened, that Wolf should howl so; and those nasty ravens, see how they keep hovering over us. Oh! how I wish we were at home!"

Conrad made no reply; the fears of Gertrude had infected his own stanch little heart, but the brave boy would not express his fears, lest he should increase those of his little sister; and so the two poor children pressed forwards, faint for want of food, for since the morning they had tasted nothing but a few of the strawberries, the remainder of which still more than half-filled Gertrude's basket. They had now entered the defile which gradually sloped down to the valley of Niederwahl, and the silence that reigned around was oppressive and unusual; there were none of the accustomed cheerful sounds issuing from the valley—the lowing of the kine, the tinkling of the guitar, or the mellow notes of the flute, the closing of the cottage casements, and the twinkling of its lights—none of these cheerful sounds were heard, not a ray of that hospitable radiance was seen through the dark branches. All was dark and dreary; all was silent, save for the dismal howling of the dog, and the croak, croak, of the ill-omened birds above.

At the head of the defile, which sloped down to the valley of Niederwahl, was a clump of larch, about fifty yards beyond the blasted pine of which Conrad had spoken, which threw its naked branches athwart the entrance of the valley. At the foot of one of these larch trees Gertrude sank down.

"Oh, Conrad dear!" she sobbed, "indeed I can go no farther. How dark it is down there in the valley! Oh, what is the matter!"

The stronger physical constitution of the boy enabled him to bear up against the terrors that overwhelmed his little sister, and he kissed and endeavoured to console her. At the same moment, a huge, shaggy Alpine dog came bounding along in the narrow strip of moonlight that gleamed down the centre of the defile that led to Niederwahl. The valley itself seemed to sleep in an ominous darkness.

Instead, however, of fawning on the children, as was his wont, the dog seized their garments by turns, and endeavoured to drag them forwards; then he would loose his hold, and run a few yards in advance, ever returning and looking up in their faces, with a pitiful whine.

The strange demeanour of the dog, with whose admirable instincts they were well acquainted, increased the alarm of the children, and with what speed they could, they followed him towards the valley. Still the same silence, the same darkness, prevailed; on the brightest moonlight nights they had been accustomed to see the lights from the hamlet gleaming like a cluster of stars from beneath the dark shadow of the rocks that overhung it. The defile became very narrow, just before it widened into the little vale or glen of Niederwahl; and where it was narrowest and almost dark from the butting of the precipices above, the children stumbled and sank above their ankles in a mass of half-melted snow. Wolf had outstripped them, and was out of sight; but they heard him again howling bitterly at the entrance of the valley.

The level of the valley was much below that even of the mountain gorge which led to it; and the apprehensions of Conrad having now reached a point at which longer suspense was unendurable, he passed his arm round his sister's waist, and fairly carried her to the brink of the valley.

What a scene did the poor children behold! A waste of snow, dotted here and there with huge disjointed pieces of rock, and the trunks of giant pines snapped like reeds by the fury of the tempest. The whole overhanging peak of the mountain above the village seemed to have fallen, and overwhelmed it. An earthquake could not have created greater devastation; the village was a dismal chaos!

Niederwahl existed no more!

The forlorn children were at first stupified by their terror and amazement, and stood gazing in silence at this terrible wreck, till they were roused by the dog, who again came whining to their feet. Then they burst out into wailing and lamentations for their home, their friends, and above all, for their dear nurse Lucilla. Absorbed in their grief, they did not notice the dog till he had repeatedly descended into the valley and then returned to them, dragging their clothes with his teeth, and still uttering his pitiful cries.

"Conrad," then said the little girl, "I think that Wolf wants us to go down with him into the valley; perhaps there is some one there whom we may help!"

To go down into the valley was, however, a dangerous enterprise, choked as it was with snows, with shattered rocks and timber. Fain would Conrad have made the venture alone, had not the weeping and terrified Gertrude protested against his leaving her by herself. Cautiously, then, they descended, at the risk of being wounded by the stones and splinters that fell clattering from the larger fragments of trees and rocks, the equilibrium of which was disturbed even by their light footsteps, or the still more imminent danger of being smothered in the snows, which in some places sank beneath them like a quicksand.

About a hundred yards from the entrance of the valley, the huge trunk of a pine tree had become wedged as it fell in an angle of the rocks. The clear cold rays of the moon streamed full into this recess, and couched partly on the cold snows, and partly supported by the fallen tree, Gertrude and her brother perceived a human form. The dog, bounding before them, crouched down beside this person, satisfied that the children were following him. A terrible sight awaited them; with a ghastly wound in the head, with both legs and one arm broken, there lay the unfortunate Wilhelm, with the exception of the children, the sole survivor of the inhabitants of Niederwahl. At the sound of their voices, he feebly turned towards them his ghastly face, and amid the excruciating agonies of his mangled frame, his honest heart felt a pang for those poor forlorn children, placed in a position the terror of which alone might have been sufficient to kill them, not a living creature near them but himself, and he fast dying, the nearest village miles distant in the mountains, the roof-trees of Niederwahl piled in ruins over the dead, to whom the waste of snow was both a coffin and a shroud.

It was something for the desolate children that their friend Wilhelm still lived. Long years afterwards, when their thoughts turned, as they would often do, to that terrific night, it was a consolation to remember how Wilhelm had told them that their gentle and beloved Lucilla had passed quietly away, that she was not one of the crushed or suffocated victims of the avalanche.

The unfortunate Wilhelm lived only to give to the children a brief detail of the event; to relate how, in the endeavour to save his wife, he had been hurled athwart the valley, and Bertha struck dead from his arms by a splinter of the rocks. He bade Conrad endeavour at once, with his sister, to make his way to Altdorf, and find out Mr. Werner, and with a prayer on his lips, that it would please God in His goodness to raise up some kind friend to guide and protect the desolate children, he expired.

What a position was theirs, kneeling in the desolate valley beside the disfigured corpse of their last friend! wearied, hungry, and appalled, and no food, no shelter, no home to which they could bend their steps! The courage of Conrad was fairly overcome, and he wept in utter despair. The faithful dog whined over his dead master, licked his cold face and hands, and then, as if conscious of the awful change that had taken place, he crouched beside the little girl, looking wistfully up at her, and rubbing her with his shaggy head, as though he would have had her understand that he transferred to her the duty and affection he had formerly rendered to the dead Wilhelm. The timid little Gertrude was the first to recover the shocks of that dreadful night.

"Conrad," she said, "we cannot stay here; let us cover up poor Wilhelm with some of the twigs and small boughs of this great fallen tree, and then we will say our prayers, Conrad dear, and the Rosary of Our Lady. God will hear us now the same as last night, when we knelt by Lucilla's side; the good God knows how much we want His help now!"

Partly ashamed that his little sister should have been the first to propose this exertion, Conrad rose, and silently aided her in stripping its feathery verdure from the fallen pine, with which, like the redbreasts for the murdered children in the pathetic English ballad, they covered the remains of poor Wilhelm; then kneeling reverently down, they offered their humble petition to Him, for whose protecting mercy, hearts so innocent were never raised in vain.

An hour later, overcome with weariness and weeping, they sank down in a sheltered nook among the rocks, more than a mile distant from the ill-fated valley, the faithful Wolf crouched at their feet, rousing up sharply if the wing of a bird did but disturb the pine-boughs above them.

The bright moon and stars shone in a clear blue sky, and streams of silver light, like the reflected radiance of an angel's wing, bathed the pure brows of the innocent sleepers. May we not, indeed, in all humbleness, suppose that those defenceless little ones, were the peculiar charge of the beneficent and holy angels on that night.

CHAPTER III.

Four days had elapsed since the terrible event which had left Conrad and his sister desolate and homeless, and converted them into Little Wanderers, dependant on the charity of the inhabitants of the districts through which they passed for the means to pursue their way.

It was not, however, in the outset of their long and toilsome journey, that those poor children realized the magnitude of the calamity that had befallen them. They were without money; a circumstance of which, in their innocence, they thought but little, and which was indeed but of slight import while they strayed only among the simple and kind-hearted mountaineers, whose few and humble wants were all supplied, and who, uncontaminated by the artificial life of a great city, were free and charitable, and would have held it equally base and sinful to deny food and a night's shelter to the wandering children, who scarce excelled them in simplicity. The base and cruel love of money is essentially the vice of large towns.

Hitherto, then, when at the end of the day's travel Conrad and Gertrude wearily entered a village, or asked assistance at a lonely cottage door, the good wife was ready with water to bathe their poor blistered feet, the father of the family bade them welcome to the evening meal, the children disputed as to who should share with the strangers their humble couch, while the whole domestic circle shed tears at their sorrowful tale; and in the morning, after the breakfast of bread and milk, it was seldom they left the hospitable roof without a provision for the day, of bread and fruit, goat's flesh, dried fish, or cheese. Even Wolf, who followed them faithfully, and was at once a protector and companion, was not left without the stranger's share, so that he kept up his strength and his spirit.

For the first three days of their journey the children had been fortunate in reaching some place of human habitation at night. This good fortune was not to continue; for on the fourth day, from the hour of noon till the last red streaks of the sun had faded in the west, and the pale rays of the moon had silvered the blue green boughs of the pine trees, they had toiled wearily on and on, through the deep valley and up the rugged mountain's side, and seen no trace of a hamlet, or even a solitary hunter's hut. More than once, as he found the evening closing in, Conrad had paused and listened anxiously for the sound of a sheep-bell, in the hope of encountering some shepherd, who would guide him and his sister to a place of shelter.

The poor children inquired for, and, as far as was possible, kept the route to Altdorf; but in that mountainous country, and in those days, it was not easy either to obtain an intelligible direction, or safely follow it without mistakes when obtained. Poor little Gertrude, too, was a hinderance to her brother, whose strong and vigorous frame, and practice in chamois-hunting, rendered him less vulnerable to the fatigues and perils of such a journey. For though Gertrude was a healthy and active child, it was one thing to climb the crags and spend a long summer day among the mountains for sport, and another to toil over them day after day, with only a brief interval of rest at night. The continuance of this toil, too, was beginning to tell upon the poor child, and she suffered so much pain from her bruised and swollen feet, that Conrad had insisted on carrying her during a portion of that day's journey, much to the distress of the little girl herself, who, at last, to relieve her brother, had suggested the idea that it was a labour which Wolf was much better able to perform, and to which, probably, he would not object, as he had often carried her and the other children at Niederwahl. Gertrude had not herein overrated honest Wolf's disposition to make himself generally useful, for he trotted merrily by the side of Conrad, with the little girl on his back, seemingly in no way inconvenienced by her slight weight. Gertrude, however, on her part, would not consent to encroach even upon a dog's good nature, and so soon as the sun set, and the cool refreshing breeze of evening sprang up, she took her turn of walking. The two children had now travelled more than an hour since the moon rose, and were fain to contemplate passing another night under such shelter as the hollow of a tree or a nook in the rocks might furnish. They had now reached a spot where the mountains, sloping gently downwards, were crowned with forests of the pine and larch, which, more thinly scattered towards the base, were mingled with thickets of juniper and tufts of the beautiful birch, whose silver bark and delicate puce-coloured twigs contrasted with the deep green of the pine tops and the fresher verdure of the graceful fern-like branches of the larch. Gently down from these mountains sloped a lovely glade, in which the wearied children paused to rest. A mountain stream, so clear, that even by the pale light of the moon the speckled trout might be seen darting over its pebbly bed, babbled on its merry course through the glen; the banks of this stream were dotted with trees, sometimes a thicket of birch, at others, the tall and stately pine, while the moist turf, green as an emerald, was sprinkled with flowers—the gay ranunculus, the modest primrose, and violets white and blue; but to our Little Wanderers, a still more grateful production of the glen was the strawberries, that were scattered in large patches over its surface, and grew luxuriantly on the borders of the stream. As the little party of the children and their dog descended into this glen, Wolf eagerly bounded towards the water, and plunged into it, to slake his thirst, while Conrad and his sister, seated on a little turfy knoll at the foot of a branching pine, unpacked the little store of provisions which had been given to them in the morning. There was cold roast kid, cheese, and bread, some of the slices spread thick with honey; so that with the pure water of the brook and the fresh strawberries, they had not only an abundant supper, but, after feeding Wolf, were supplied for the morrow's breakfast.

It was a very dreadful thing for these two poor children to be driven forth to traverse the wild mountains, without any other friend or protector than their dog, but they were really safer with heaven and their innocence in that wilderness, than they might have been in the busy haunts of men; besides that, their mountain education, and the wise and pious teaching of the excellent Lucilla, had so inspired them with a submissive faith in Providence, that they did not even think of fear, and were more grateful for the bounty, Divine and human, which had filled that little wallet with plain and wholesome food, than are the town-bred rich for all the luxuries that are spread forth to tempt their appetites.

The kind woman and her husband who had given them those provisions had indeed offered to keep

Gertrude at their cottage, while Conrad alone pursued his way to Altdorf; but the affectionate children could not bear to be separated, and the good-hearted couple sympathized with them too truly to press their proposal; besides that, it appeared to have been the wish of Lucilla that they should both proceed to Altdorf. The two had finished their meal, and were considering how they would shelter themselves among the rocks and thickets from the keen night wind, when Wolf, who, after eating his share of the supper, had been dozing at their feet, suddenly started up, and, sniffing the air, gave a low angry growl, and then stood with his eyes glaring and ears erect, as if on the watch for some coming danger. This demeanour of the dog alarmed the two children, as they apprehended that he scented the vicinity of some wild animal, and knew that both wolves and bears infested the recesses of the mountains.

Poor Conrad looked eagerly round for some place of refuge; if he could climb one of the tall trees, his sister could not, and, moreover, that would be no security against the bear, who, despite his clumsiness, is in the habit of mounting the trees to steal the wild honey. Meantime a crashing of boughs was heard among the juniper thickets that bordered the glen, and Wolf, planting himself before the children, uttered a succession of short fierce barks, while a dark, unwieldy form was seen scrambling down the mountain side. There was no mistake about the unwelcome visitor—it was a huge bear. Poor little Gertrude screamed involuntarily, while her brother, grasping her by the hand, again looked round for shelter. The bright moonbeams, which discovered in the distance their formidable foe, also lighted up a jutting rock near the head of the stream, and about a hundred paces beyond the spot where they had been sitting. A black blank space below these rocks seemed to indicate some cave or recess, which might perhaps afford them shelter; true, it might be the den of some other ferocious animal, perhaps even of the bear itself, but that at least was doubtful, while their destruction, if they remained in the open glade, was certain, for the monster had extricated himself from the thickets, and was advancing across the glen at a brisk pace, uttering savage growls, which were responded to by still fiercer barks from Wolf. Calling upon the dog, who, with all his strength and courage, they feared would be no match for the bear, the two children fled across the glen. The bear, who now perceived them, quickened his steps. Looking over his shoulder as he ran, Conrad was terrified to see with what tremendous strides the brute was gaining on them; the very ground seemed to shake with his heavy lumbering tread. Obedient to the voice of his young master, Wolf followed the children, turning round, however, at intervals, as if to defy the bear, with his furious bark and glaring teeth.

"Courage, Gertrude!" gasped the boy. "See that little opening in the rocks! we are safe if we can reach it, that great brute cannot get through."

The children were now not twenty paces from the promised refuge, when Gertrude's foot caught in the tangle of some creeping plant, and she fell to the ground, dragging Conrad down with her. Before they fell they could hear the terrible growling of the bear, mingled with Wolf's threatening bark. They were on their feet again in a moment, but they could hear the heavy breathing of the monster, to which they would have assuredly fallen victims but for the intervention of the noble dog, who, boldly springing on the bear, fastened his terrible fangs in his throat till they almost met. The bear rose upon its hind legs, and, roaring in its agony, endeavoured to grasp his assailant in his fatal hug; but the sudden elevation of his own heavy body, and the great weight of the dog, loosened the grasp of the latter, and he was flung twenty feet distant by the bear, and close to the very aperture in the rocks into which the children had already crept. The bear, growling more ferociously than ever, and bleeding profusely from the wound in his throat, rushed headlong forwards to renew the contest, which Wolf, though the result was very uncertain, would not have declined, but for the voice of Conrad calling him, in obedience to which he followed the children. This aperture in the rocks was arched and narrow, and so low, that it was only by stooping that Conrad could enter it; the dog, crouching down, easily followed him, but the bulky proportions of the bear quite forbade his profiting by the example; and being a stupid, no less than clumsy brute, he dashed heedlessly after the dog, and literally knocked his head against a wall, the wall of the rock. Then a brilliant idea seemed to flash across the bear's brain,—that he could drag his victims forth from their hiding-place with his paw; and forthwith introducing that member to the hole in the rock, it was immediately fastened on by the fangs of Wolf, from which the indiscreet bear did not extricate it without considerable damage.

Conrad and Gertrude flattered themselves that this second specimen of their defender's prowess would have finally daunted the spirits of the bear, and that he would have at once beaten a retreat, in which expectation they were, however, sadly disappointed; the bear possessing an amount of courage or obstinacy, which instigated him, instead of limping off, to seat himself directly in front of the aperture in the rocks, growling horribly, and glaring at them with his great red eyeballs, in a fashion that excited the indignation of Wolf and the fears of the two poor children.

They were, however, quite safe for the present; it was impossible for the bear to squeeze his unwieldy carcase through the circumscribed limits which the children and the dog had passed; and feeling, therefore, so far perfectly secure, Conrad and Gertrude thought of investigating their haven of refuge, for a pale star-like radiance in the distance led them to hope that they might find some other mode of egress than that which was blockaded by the bear. A sound of falling water, too, met their ears, which became louder as they groped their way cautiously towards the light at the other entrance of the cavern, not without the fear that though the entrance of the cavern was too small to admit the unwieldy bear, it might still be the lurking-place of the no less dangerous wolf. Their dog, however, who, when they first moved from the mouth of the cavern, seemed in some doubt as to whether he ought not to retain his post as sentry over the bear, finally determined that he ought to accompany them, and trotted briskly beside them. Meantime, as they advanced through the cavern the increasing light made their progress easier, the little star-like gleam gradually expanding till the bright moonbeams were seen breaking through a lofty natural arch, which appeared the boundary of the cavern. By this increased light, too, the children perceived that the walls of the cavern, hewn by the hand of nature in the solid rock, presented in many places a smooth shining surface, while their fantastic projections glittered, as they caught the moonbeams, with the lustre of the spars that were pendant from them. The subdued rushing sound of water, too, which they had heard in the distance, increased to the roar of a cascade, and Conrad, as he heard it, hurried forward, eager to ascertain if he and his sister could by this second outlet escape from the cavern. The dry sparkling sand, however, of its flooring, and the starry pendants from its roof and walls, together with the still increasing roar of the waters, contributed to awaken in the boy's mind a fear that the immediate boundary of the cavern was some cascade, whose waters had been the original source of the petrifactions in the cave. Among the woods and waterfalls and ice-formed glaciers, those glittering wonders of nature, grottoes and caves, walled and roofed with spars, are so common, that Conrad, who had often penetrated among similar scenes, readily apprehended that egress from the cavern by this route would be impracticable, at least for his sister.

They had now reached that extremity where the light that had guided them had at first appeared so small and star-like; and as they stood within the span of the broad and lofty arch, which there formed the roof of the cavern, even the sad and travel-worn children stood silently holding each other by the hand, impressed with awe and admiration of the sublimity and beauty of the scene that burst upon them.

Towering and inaccessible rocks rose on all sides, bare to their summits, which were crowned with the pine and fir: but from amid those dark woods burst the torrent, falling almost perpendicularly down the crags, shining like a sheet of silver in the moonbeams, as it rushed tumultuously over the summit of the rocks, but becoming involved in wreaths of white vapour midway on its descent. On all sides of the circular bason into which the cascade fell the rocks were bare of vegetation; but from the points of those rocks everywhere appeared huge stalactites, and there catching the moonbeams, glowed with the most gorgeous colours, red, blue, and green, as though, in the wantonness of her bounty, Nature had transferred to upper earth the treasures of the dreary mine, and hung those rocks with glittering clusters of the glowing ruby, the pale emerald, and the sapphire.

The noise and incessant motion of the waters, the white glare of the moonbeams, and the effulgence of the many-hued stalactites, so confused at first the senses of Conrad, that he stood for a few moments dazzled and bewildered; then bidding his sister stay with Wolf within the arch of the cavern, he stepped cautiously beyond its limits, in the hope that on the borders of the basin, which had been hollowed out by the waters, there might be some ledge of rock broad enough to afford them a footing, and thereby a means of escape from their enemy the bear, who had planted himself at the other end of the cave.

With a sigh, the mountain-bred boy returned to his sister, finding that escape that way was impossible. Beyond the cavern there was not a hand's-breadth of rock round the basin, to which the precipice sunk sheer down. To the right of the cave, the rocks, losing their circular form, closed up like a wall on either side, between which the waters swept with great violence, as they issued down the mouth of the basin, but gradually becoming smoother, till in their devious course they furnished the rippling stream of the glen where the wandering children had been assailed by the bear.

Conrad's eye anxiously measured the rocks, peaks, and pinnacles and abutments that were impending directly over the boiling waters, which might perhaps have afforded a hold or a resting-place for his hand or foot; but if his eye grew almost bewildered and his brain dizzy as he glanced from the steep and glittering rocks to the foaming waters, how could his poor little sister traverse such a path? Beyond the basin, too, the rocks closed in almost midnight blackness over the stream, and one false step in the gloom would engulf them in the whirling waters.

With a heavy heart the poor boy returned to his little sister, compelled to tell her that he had found no means of escape; that, indeed, the best thing seemed to be to retrace their steps. The bear might by this time have left the other extremity of the cavern, which would at any rate afford them a good shelter for the night, as it was inaccessible to any wild animal.

Though he endeavoured thus to comfort his sister, it was with a sorrowful heart that poor Conrad retraced his steps to the extremity of the cavern which was besieged by the bear, as he was aware that the obstinate and ferocious brute might maintain its post for many hours; and he and Gertrude, in their flight from the animal, had left the wallet with the remnants of their supper on the bank of the stream.

The intense darkness that prevailed, apart from his savage growls, informed the children, as they approached the entrance of the cavern, that the huge, clumsy body of the bear was still there, excluding the moonlight from the aperture. Weary and heart-sick, the poor little brother and sister sank down, near the entrance of the grotto, with their arms round each other's necks, and their dog crouching at their feet.

"Do not cry, darling," said the boy, as he felt the tears, which poor little Gertrude could not repress, falling on his face. "Think, after all, how much worse it would have been, if we had not found this cave to hide in from the bear, or if poor Wolf had not been with us! Besides, we can sleep here quite safe."

"I cannot sleep, Conrad, dear," answered the little girl. "Hark how the bear growls; perhaps he will stay there till we are starved!"

"No, he will not stay there so long as that, darling," returned the boy, "and perhaps the good God will drive him away. And oh! hark, Gertrude, what cry was that?"

"It is the hunters!" exclaimed the little girl joyfully, as she started to her feet. "Oh, Conrad dear, run to the mouth of the cavern, and shout to them; who knows but it is that very bear they are after!"

Even while Gertrude spoke, the darkening obstruction was removed from the mouth of the cavern, and the moonlight streamed into it; for the cry of the hunters had startled the ferocious brute, and he rose from his recumbent posture, uttering savage growls.

Cautiously Conrad now put his head out of the mouth of the cavern, and uttered the long shrill cry with which the hunters make known their vicinity to each other. The rushing of many feet, the shouts of men, the baying of dogs, the crack of carbines, and a yell of anguish from the bear, made the response to Conrad's cry.

An hour afterwards, they were seated among a strong party of jovial hunters, who, being bent upon killing that very bear, which had done great mischief about an adjacent village, had pursued him since the morning, and who were kindling a huge fire of pine boughs in the glade where they had captured and slain him, broiling the savory steaks which they cut from the carcase, and made a merry supper, with the addition of bread, wild honey, and the little flasks of brandy which they each carried.

These brave and kind men made much of the poor children, whose sad story drew tears from more than one of their number; they made them a bed near their watch-fire, and the next day took them to the village to which they belonged, and which was on the route to Altdorf.

CHAPTER IV.

THE house of Mr. Friedrich Werner, the priest of St. Alice, at Altdorf, to whom the two children, Gertrude and Conrad, were to apply, was a pretty dwelling on the outskirts of that town, so famous in history as the scene of the bold struggle of the Swiss for liberty, when the hero William Tell resisted the insulting tyranny of Gessler, the Austrian governor of Altdorf.

The mountainous country of Switzerland is subject to sudden and great alterations of climate, so that, in the middle of summer even, the inhabitants are sometimes surprised by a few days of wet and cold weather. A week of this dreary weather had broken the pleasantness of the unusually warm and early spring, and Mrs. Steibelt, a widowed sister of Mr. Werner, was standing in the parlour of her brother's dwelling, peevishly trimming and picking off the dead leaves from some favourite plants, which had been blighted by the wind, when, looking up, she perceived through the parlour window two children, poorly clad, coming up the little garden in front of the cottage.

Now, though Mr. Werner was a very worthy man, and endeavoured, on all occasions, conscientiously to act up to the doctrines of charity and kindness which he preached, his sister, naturally a woman of churlish disposition, and who had been still further soured by misfortune, by no means followed this excellent example. The good Mr. Werner, however, who was as simple as he was kindhearted, refused to see his sister's faults; and when they were pointed out to him by persons who had suffered from her ill nature, he would always make excuses for her, alleging that his poor Dorothea had suffered so much from the ill conduct and ruin of her husband, that her temper was embittered, invariably concluding his defence with the remark, that Mrs. Steibelt was naturally the best-natured woman in the world; as an instance of which he might observe that, when they were children together, she had never quarrelled with him. Nobody doubted these assertions of Mr. Werner; but those who had suffered from the sharp tongue and penurious habits of Mrs. Steibelt had always for answer, that if she never had quarrelled with her brother, even during their childhood, the merit was all on his side, and that, as to her husband's bad temper and ruined fortunes, Mrs. Steibelt had herself been the cause of both the one and the other. An evil day it was for the poor of that suburb of Altdorf in which Mr. Werner lived, when in his charity and brotherly kindness, he took his sister into his house. The good man was not conscious how many a distressed suppliant was turned harshly from his door while he was occupied with his books in his study, or the duties of his ministry abroad. More than once, indeed, when Mr. Werner had detected his sister roughly dismissing his distressed petitioners, he had foiled her intentions by administering the aid they asked, and, in his gentle manner, rebuked her. But

Mrs. Steibelt cared little for that, and only went off muttering that he would leave himself without a stiver; and that when his fine charity had left him without house and home, he would find how grateful people would be, and what a deal of charity there would be for him. On those occasions, too, when in spite of her Mr. Werner had committed the flagrant misdemeanour of giving away some of his money, she would make the poor man suffer for a week, stinting the table even of a sufficiency of food, and grumbling about the expense of the jug of beer, which was the poor priest's only private indulgence. In short, Socrates himself could scarce have suffered more from his shrew of a wife than did Mr. Werner from his miserly sister, who, while she grudged him not only the benevolent pleasure of assisting others, but even common necessaries from his own money, was, unknown to him, making a private hoard for herself. For the last three weeks Mrs. Steibelt, who was in general as miserable herself as she contrived to make others, had been almost happy; for her brother had gone on a journey to Wurtzburg, in the university of which town he had been educated, and where he now expected to meet some famous scholars.

Mr. Werner had set out on this visit to his beloved university with some such feelings as we may suppose in a hardly-used slave who has just shaken off his bondage, or a bird let loose from its cage. He was, indeed, conscious of his own weakness, and ashamed of the yoke to which he submitted. Mrs. Steibelt, on her part, was no less delighted; and the very morning of her brother's departure, she sat down to calculate how much money would be saved during her brother's absence upon little weekly allowances which he made to various aged and infirm people, which allowance she determined to stop, little dreaming that Werner, suspicious that such would be her resolution, had given his pensioners their allowance in advance.

Mrs. Steibelt's personal appearance very well suited her disposition; she was a tall, gaunt woman, with a sallow countenance, puckered into a thousand wrinkles by avarice and suspicion, and small greenish eyes, that peered from under a pent brow with a keen, spiteful expression; her voice, too, was no less of the quality becoming a quarrelsome, ill-natured woman; it had a metallic, brassy sound, that rung most unpleasantly on the ear.

On that morning, when she saw the two children approaching her brother's house, Mrs. Steibelt was unusually ill-tempered, for the cold and wet weather was very disagreeable to a person who would not allow herself generous living, or even a sufficiency of clothing; so she took the meed of the personal suffering caused by her avarice, out of the persons who were so unfortunate as to approach her, and it was in a very shrill and angry tone indeed that she called out to her servant,—

"Catherine!—Catherine!—go and turn those two ragged children out of the garden. Every beggar in Altdorf comes to this house; but I promise them they shall find the difference, now the fool of a master is away!"

The servant, a worthy girl, who only endured the humours of Mrs. Steibelt out of sheer compassion to the foolish old gentleman her brother, for whom she contrived to lessen much of the discomfort of his sister's household management, hastened to obey this command, and her kind heart was immediately touched by the appearance and manners of the little applicants, who humbly asked if that was the abode of Mr. Werner. The poor children were indeed ragged, as Mrs. Steibelt had spitefully remarked, for in their long and toilsome journey their clothes had been torn by the rocks and briars, and their shoes, of chamois leather, had been worn from their feet; but, wearied as they were, and miserably clad, their exceeding beauty, for they were both very handsome children, and their charming expression of innocence and candour, would have interested any person less hard and selfish than Mrs. Steibelt, and at once won the sympathies of the good Catherine.

The countenance of the boy, which lighted up when his inquiry was answered in the affirmative, grew sad and depressed when he was told by Catherine that her master was absent from home—that he had gone to Wurtzburg; and he asked timidly if that place was far away.

"Because you see, madame," he said, "our errand is with Father Werner, who is to take us to Stutgard, and we have come a long way to find him; and I should not care for myself, but poor little Gertrude, my sister here, is not so strong as I am; and the people in your towns are very cruel—they refuse us even a little bread and a cup of milk, if we cannot pay for it."

"Poor children!" said Catherine, "where do you come from, then? and what good people are those you have lived among, that you have to learn that those must starve who have not money?"

"We came from the mountains, madame," replied the boy, shedding tears as he added, "an avalanche fell, and buried our village, and our dear nurse Lucilla died that very morning; and she had told us before that we must come to Altdorf, and gave us a letter, which I have here, for Mr. Werner. We have now been travelling many days, for we have often lost our way, but never till this morning, have we been refused shelter or food, and there are so many houses here, and Gertrude is so tired and hungry."

Catherine hesitated, and thought how unfortunate it was for those poor children that her master should be absent. Without the recommendation of the letter to him, she knew that their sad condition would have secured his pity and assistance; under the supervisorship of his avaricious and cruel sister, she did not dare even to give them a crust of bread.

Meantime, the shrewish temper of Mrs. Steibelt was aroused by the girl's protracted speech with the children at the door, and she rushed out, calling Catherine an idle, gossiping minion, and with a threat to the poor children that she would send them to prison for coming to beg, and to steal also, she had no doubt, for beggars were always thieves.

Catherine turned aside and stood silent; she knew by experience that the wisest course was to let the torrent of her mistress's ill-humour have free way; but little Gertrude looked aghast and terrified, and Conrad, with a flush of anger and honest pride, boldly facing the ill-tempered woman, exclaimed—

"Indeed, madame, but you must be very wicked to say that because we are poor, we must be thieves; all our friends at Niederwahl were poor—Wilhelm, and Bertha, and old Martin, and our dear Lucilla—but they were not thieves; and if any stranger came into the village, there was not a cottage in it where he had not the offer of shelter, and the best food we had to give him."

As it was a custom of Mrs. Steibelt to interrupt any one who dared to resent her bitter speech with epithets still more offensive, Catherine was surprised that she suffered the boy to speak thus far, but still more by the look of bewildered amazement with which she regarded him, her lips and cheeks becoming suddenly as pale as ashes.

"Where do you come from?" she then said, fiercely. "What is your name? and this woman, this Lucilla, who was she, to send you begging to this house, to impose on my brother's good nature? Some lazy, worthless creature, I warrant me?"

"Lucilla was our nurse, our dear nurse," said little Gertrude, bursting into tears; "and she is dead, or we should never have come here."

"Yes," interposed Conrad, with his young heart swelling at the cruelty of Mrs. Steibelt, "and she was neither lazy nor worthless; but she told us that sometimes there were cruel and hard-hearted people in the great cities, and you, madame, it seems, are one of them. But we will not trouble you any more, since Father Werner is not at home; I and poor Gertrude must go on to Stutgard. Surely we shall find some charitable people, who, for love of our Blessed Lady and the saints, will give us a morsel of bread by the way."

"To Stutgard! oh, you are going to Stutgard," said Mrs. Steibelt, with such a strange, wild laugh, that the two poor children shrunk back frightened. "Well, make haste, then; you will find it a nice little journey."

Then, as the two forlorn children, hungry and footsore, turned their weary steps from the inhospitable house, Mrs. Steibelt proceeded to her warm parlour, muttering to herself, "Yes, yes, I cannot be mistaken; 'tis as if the dead had risen from their graves, when I looked in the faces of that boy and girl. Poor little wretches, what will become of them? Well, well, if they die by the way, I cannot help it. I should still say it is for the best that my brother is not at home. For the sake of what he calls justice, he would hand me, his own sister, to starvation, or to the gripe of the hangman; yes, he would, he would. I wish, though, these children had not come here—I wish they had not!" So Mrs. Steibelt sat by the blazing fire of fir cones, that sent out a sweet smell into the apartment, while the two orphan children, shivering with cold and hunger, and with the tears slowly trickling down their pale cheeks, stole mournfully away from the house, to which they would have been welcomed with an affection like that of their lost friend, Lucilla, had the good priest, its master, been at home.

The manly spirit of Conrad had enabled him to make some show of courage before the cruel woman, Mrs. Steibelt; but as he felt how wearily Gertrude dragged by his hand, while poor Wolf, who they had left at the garden gate, trotted beside them, and looked up with a wistful air, as if he understood and sympathized with their grief, his great spirit failed, and Conrad wept with his little sister. And thus the Little Wanderers took their way along the road that led from Father Werner's house to the open country beyond the town of Altdorf.

The day, as before observed, was exceedingly cheerless; all the beautiful promise of the spring which had decked the rough ledges of the rocks with tufts of snowdrops and the pale primrose, and hung the hedge-rows with a green garment, was darkened by the dull leaden hue of the wintry-looking sky; a howling wind, driving before it a storm of sleet and rain, swept through the streets of Altdorf, and pierced the very bones of the poor children as they drew round them their worn garments, already saturated by the rain.

"Indeed, indeed, Conrad dear, I cannot walk any further," said little Gertrude, as she sunk down by the wayside. "I am so hungry and so cold, I think I shall die!"

"Then I shall die, too," said Conrad, sobbing, as he knelt beside her, and tried to chafe a little warmth into her chilled hands. "But take heart, dear Gertrude, there must surely be some good people in this great town; and see now, there is an old ruined cottage beside that fir copse yonder, that will be a shelter for you, Gertrude, and you can stay there with Wolf, while I go back to the town and try and beg a bit of bread for you. What a sad thing for us that Father Werner was away! His sister is a wicked woman; how she looked at us, as if she had known us before, and how pale she turned! Nay, keep up, Gertrude dear, do—do! See how nicely I can carry you; speak to me, Gertrude. There now; see in the corner of this old cottage you are quite safe from the rains, and almost sheltered from the wind. There, rest your head upon Wolf's neck, he will help to keep you warm! There, you are better now; keep up your heart, Gertrude, and say your prayers while I am gone—I shall be back soon."

While speaking thus, the brave-hearted boy, though himself weak and sick with fatigue and want of food, had managed to drag his feeble sister within the shelter of a dismantled cottage, which stood just in the shadow of a fir copse, about half a mile distant from the priest's dwelling. Poor Gertrude at first answered his encouraging words only with low moans; but partially reviving in the warmth diffused from the body of the faithful dog, and no longer shrinking in the piercing gale, from which she was now screened by the walls of the cottage, she looked up, and smiled upon Conrad's endeavours to cheer her.

"That is all right now, Gertrude," said the boy; "you are better already: and see here are some dry leaves that will make us a nice bed, and some of these old planks I can set up against the doorway, and they will keep out the wind famously; and if I can get some food in the town, we will have a fire, and stay here a day or two to rest ourselves; and perhaps in that time Father Werner may come back from this Wurtzburg, where his sister said he was gone; and I am sure he must be a good man, and very different to his sister, or dear nurse Lucilla would never have thought of sending us to him. There now, make yourself comfortable with good old Wolf. I shall be back soon, I can walk strong!"

"No, you can't, Conrad dear; I know you are hungry and tired as well as I am, and look at your poor feet, bleeding at every step you take," said Gertrude, weeping; "and look at poor Wolf, too," she added,—"he is almost dying of hunger, I can feel all his bones. Oh, the people in these towns are very cruel, we have had so little to eat since we came among them. To my mind, Conrad, we had better have staid among the mountains, near our poor old Niederwahl. You know how often the good people in the villages asked us to stay with them, instead of travelling and travelling on and on, to find out this great, wicked, ugly Stutgard. I am sure it must be ugly and wicked, and I had rather not try any more to find it out."

"But that would be to disobey our dear nurse Lucilla, darling," answered Conrad. "You know that poor Wilhelm told us that the last words of Lucilla were, that we were to go to Stutgard. I would no more disobey her now, than when she was alive, and our Blessed Lady and all the good saints and angels will pray for us, Gertrude; and if we die, I would rather think that we had not to remember once disobeying Lucilla, living or dead." After speaking thus, and again kissing his sister, Conrad was about to sally from the ruined hut, when hasty steps were heard without, and the servant Catherine, panting and breathless with running, met the boy at the threshold of the hut.

"Ah, it is all right," she exclaimed. "Poor little things, I thought you would come here for shelter when I saw the road you took. There," she continued, "is some cold meat and bread for you, and a bottle of milk. Now you must try and make a fire, and after you are warmed and rested, I will direct you where to get a better shelter than this for the night. I cannot stay with you long, for my mistress thinks I am gone only to see my sister."

Conrad looked wistfully at the food which the kind girl produced from a small basket, but he hesitated to take it.

"But your cross mistress," he said, "will she not be angry with you for taking away the meat and bread?"

"She will know nothing about it; and if she did, I do not care," answered Catherine. "I have leave from my master, the good father, to give away a certain quantity of provisions among the poor. He will be very angry when he comes home and finds how Mrs. Steibelt has treated you; for I shall tell him all, though you may do that first; for before he left home I heard him say that he should go to Stutgard before his return, and that he was grieved and anxious that he had not heard from some person living in the district of St. Gothard, who, I take it, must have been your nurse."

While the kind-hearted Catherine herself made these explanations, she struck a light, and speedily kindled into a blaze the dry sticks and leaves which Conrad had collected; then, while the half-famished children partook of the food which she had brought, she went on to tell them that she had a sister at Altdorf, who was the wife of a serjeant in the army of Maria Theresa, the Empress-Queen of Austria, who was at that time at war with Frederick the Great, King of Prussia. The army of Frederick was in possession of Saxony, and the whole states of Germany were harassed at intervals by the passage of the adverse troops. The two children, in the seclusion of their pleasant Swiss valley, had not heard, and would not have understood if they had, anything of the terrors of war, or the sufferings which the industrious and harmless portion of mankind, suffer from the tyranny and greedy thirst of dominion among their rulers. When, therefore, Catherine told them that if they stayed and rested themselves for an hour or two in the hut, she would come to them again in the evening, and take them back to the town, to the house in which her sister was lodging; that her sister Annette Rosen was about to set out to join her husband, who was along with a skirmishing party of Austrians on the borders of Saxony—they were greatly pleased. Her poor sister Annette had been very ill, said Catherine, but she was now better, and it was nearly a year since she had seen her husband, who was, like herself, a native of Altdorf. She had made up her mind to join him, the more so as he was himself in hopes of being able to meet her at Stutgard, where one of his officers had important business. Poor Catherine sighed and shook her head as she told this story, and spoke sadly of the perils of lone travelling to a delicate woman, with a little baby not a year old, and of the chance that Wurtemburg itself might be disturbed by the rival armies, and the terrible danger of falling into the hands of the Prussian soldiers. Of these details, however, the children took little heed, so delighted were they at the good Catherine's proposal that they should travel to Stutgard with her sister, who, in case that Mr. Werner should not have arrived in that town, would then place them in safety with an aunt who was settled there, till the priest should have returned from Wurtzburg.

The rest of the wintry day passed pleasantly with the two children. They kept up a good fire, their poor little tired limbs were rested, and Wolf, who had his share of their food, slept cosily beside them, while they talked over the prospects of their journey, and drew forth, to admire them for about the hundredth time, the pictures of the cavalier and lady, which Lucilla had hung about their necks. Again, too, did they shed tears in recalling the memory of their nurse, and exhaust their fancy in simple conjectures as to the condition of their parents, whether they were dead or living, and the reason why they had been placed wholly under the care of Lucilla, who, on her part, seemed to have trusted no one but Mr. Werner.

Towards evening, Catherine again made her appearance, and conducted Conrad and Gertrude to the house of a tradesman in Altdorf, where her sister, Mrs. Rosen, was lodging. This Mrs. Rosen was a delicate-looking but rather pretty young woman; she was occupied in preparing for her journey, while her infant, a fine boy about a year old, slept in a cradle beside her. Inured as she was to hardships and danger in the wanderings of a soldier's wife, her temper was not soured, nor her honesty corrupted by her own sad experience, and with her good sister she wept over the mournful story of the two unfortunate children.

To Mrs. Rosen and Catherine, Conrad now showed the portraits which Lucilla had given them, which, since their entry to the towns, they had hitherto carefully concealed. The unsophisticated Catherine was loud in her admiration both of the pictures and the glittering stones that surrounded them; but

Mrs. Rosen, better acquainted with the world, and vaguely aware of the value of the diamonds, was in some anxiety as to the safety of articles so costly on the persons of two poor children about to travel in a disturbed country, with no stronger protector than herself. After the children, whose swollen feet she bathed in warm water, had retired to bed, she expressed to Catherine her conviction that their parents had been people of superior rank, and that some painful mystery was involved in the circumstances which had led to their seclusion in the valley of Niederwahl.

CHAPTER V.

THE blue waters of the lake of Lucerne were sparkling in the beams of a bright summer morning, as Conrad and Gertrude, in company with the good Mrs. Rosen, issued from the romantic little town which bears the same name as the lake, and the canton, of which it is the capital. With a very considerable accession of comfort, they were pursuing their journey, for Mrs. Rosen had a small amount of money at command; and apart from the assurance she felt that any portion of it which she might expend upon the children would be disbursed by Mr. Werner, or more than replaced by the sale of one of the diamonds which surrounded the portraits, she could not have endured that the children, the poor little girl especially, should pursue so wearisome a journey on foot. Before leaving Altdorf, therefore, she had purchased two stout mules, on one of which she herself rode with her baby, and a valise, packed with linen and a few necessaries, while on the other were mounted Conrad and little Gertrude. Before leaving Altdorf, too, Mrs. Rosen had provided the children with fresh and substantial clothing. The faithful Wolf still trudged beside them.

Two days they had spent at Lucerne, and as their course would take them through the Protestant canton of Zurich, Mrs. Rosen had not lost the opportunity of taking the children to the Catholic churches of Lucerne, where the celebrations of religion had greatly impressed the little mountaineers, who in the remote valley of Niederwahl had neither church nor chapel to visit. Nothing, meanwhile, could be more lovely than the scene that surrounded them. A delicious valley, sweeping down to the shores of the lake, orchards dazzling with their white blossoms, hamlets nestled under sheltering rocks, church spires sparkling in the sunbeams, vine-covered slopes, the wide waters of the lake, melting to a blue haze in the distance, and bounded by mountains dark with pine forests, or with their summits white with eternal snows.

As Mrs. Rosen proposed to take advantage of the beauty of the morning to progress as far as possible on her journey, she had, before leaving Lucerne, packed a wallet with the materials for the noon-tide meal. Meantime, in the oppressive heat of midday, the mules stumbled down the rough sides of a bare and steep hill, at the foot of which the ground, though not level, rose only in gentle undulations, scattered with groups of oak and chestnut, the latter now in all the glory of its luxuriant foliage. The little party of travellers were thoroughly wearied, for the heat was of that oppressive nature which characterizes the summer of mountainous countries; not a breath of air had been felt on the brown and arid hill, on which the sun blazed with a blinding radiance. Mrs. Rosen's infant wailed, and hid its face, and poor little Gertrude, though she would not complain, was so faint with heat and thirst, that an exclamation of delight burst from her lips at the sight of the woods shadowing the cool green turf at the foot of the hill; a dashing sound of water too was heard, and, guided by the sound, the travellers presently reached an open space, where a miniature cascade leaped from amid woods and rocks, to water a pleasant glade, whose smooth ascent was crowned by the ruins of an ancient convent.

"Here we will rest, my dear children," said Mrs. Rosen, "for this no doubt is the old convent of St. Clare, which we were told we might reach by noonday; we will rest here for an hour, and spend the night at the first town we come to after sunset."

Very gladly the children urged the weary animal. they rode through the gap in the dilapidated wall to the court of the convent, which was almost an entire ruin. The roof of the church had fallen in, and the columns that supported the mouldering arches were thickly wreathed with ivy, while the green moss had gathered thickly on the fragments of the building that cumbered the court-yard.

Near to what had once been the doorway of the refectory, an enormous chestnut spread a grateful shade, the rich turf beneath it was spangled with wild flowers, and having left the mules to drink at the stream, and crop the herbage on its margin, Mrs. Rosen and her young companions were soon partaking of their own meal under the shade of the chestnut. A very cheerful meal it was, though consisting only of bread, ham, and dried fruit, with a single flask of light Rhine wine to temper the fresh waters drawn from the brook. The baby clapped its hands, and gamboled with the children and Wolf on the turf, till, overcome by the heat and fatigue of their journey, the whole party fell asleep, with the exception of Wolf, who, stationing himself beside them as they lay clustered together beneath the chestnut tree, assumed a grave air, as though he felt himself to be their responsible guardian.

Mrs. Rosen, occupied with sad and anxious thoughts, sat leaning her head against the trunk of the tree, dreamily regarding the sleeping children, till her attention was roused by the demeanour of Wolf, who, first erecting his ears and sniffing the air, started up, and, running towards the ruins, began to bark loudly, and then disappeared among the shadows of the dark arches and crumbling walls. Mrs. Rosen herself started from her sitting posture, alarmed by the demeanour of the faithful animal, whom she relied upon as no contemptible guard on her perilous journey.

The children, partially roused by Wolf's bark, opened their eyes, and, turning round, sank again into a deep sleep. Meantime, Mrs. Rosen, approaching the ruins, heard the dog bark again ; and then a rough masculine voice, as if threatening the animal. In another minute, two men made their appearance, accompanied by Wolf, who, though he no longer barked angrily, looked up at them with a surly air, uttering short snappish growls, as if he was by no means sure that he did well in treating them with civility. These men were muscular, rough-looking fellows, in a kind of half-military attire, as though they were a cross between the regular soldier and the retainers or servants of some great nobleman, as they wore huge jack-boots and steel breastplates, and carried both swords and carbines, while their liveries of violet, trimmed with light green, and the badge of a falcon, which they wore, wrought in gold thread, on the left arm, seemed to betoken they belonged to some private service.

On seeing Mrs. Rosen, the elder of these men hailed her in a surly manner, and bade her call off the dog; "for," added he, "the brute seems very uncivil, and I am not very polite, and as two of a temper agree no better than two of a trade, I may take a fancy to stop his growling, by knocking out his brains."

The looks and manner of this man, who, early as was the hour, appeared slightly intoxicated, so much alarmed Mrs. Rosen, that she immediately complied with his demand in calling off the dog, who, now well acquainted with her voice, quitted the strangers, and crouched beside the children, still showing his teeth and growling. The men strode forwards, and looked at the children, who were gazing drowsily round them, disturbed by the noise: then he who had first spoken, again addressed Mrs. Rosen, observing with a laugh, "Well, you have a fine family, mistress; two bouncing boys, and a girl pretty enough to be the daughter of a count palatine; find them rather beyond your management at times, I reckon, though; would you not be glad to get rid of them now at a fair bargain? Come, now, what price do you value them at?"

There was something so sinister, as well as ferocious, in the appearance of this man, that Mrs. Rosen trembled under an apprehension that his words really implied more than the dull jest which was their apparent meaning; and she answered that she had never yet found her children beyond her management, and would be by no means disposed to part with them.

"Nay," returned the man, "think of it twice, mistress, you will not have such an offer every day;

what say you, now, fifty rix-dollars, paid down at the moment, for the girl and the big boy, the little one you can keep?"

Mrs. Rosen, who was now thoroughly terrified, looked anxiously round, in the hope of the appearance of travellers, who might protect her and the poor desolate children, in whose liberty no offer of profit would have tempted her to traffic. This man, too, assumed that the children were hers, and what then must be his character, who could suppose that a mother would sell her own offspring?

The companion of the man stared at him in astonishment equal to that of Mrs. Rosen, but from a very different cause; and when he had ceased speaking, exclaimed with a loud laugh, "Why, Caspar, thou are surely reft of thy wits. For what purpose in the world wouldst thou plague thyself with a pair of troublesome brats. Thou hast no wife, and I think this boy and girl will scarce do to set up in a bachelor's establishment."

"Gó to, Gottfried, thou art a fool!" politely rejoined the worthy whose name was Caspar; "how do you know that I want the boy and girl to set up in my bachelor's establishment? Do we not know that the old count, my master's uncle, has become very affectionate and penitent in his latter days, and wishes to see his grandchildren, whose existence he has hitherto forgotten, and that thereupon the young count my master, and the old count's nephew, piously undertook to place the dear babes in the arms of their anxious grandsire, and forthwith dispatched me, his very faithful and ill-rewarded servant, upon so troublesome a journey, in quest of the two urchins, that I am disposed, as far as possible, to abridge it; and since I cannot find those we are in quest of, take these two very comely children in their stead, who, I am sure, may very well pass for the offspring of any count and countess in the world. You are aware the dear old count would not know the difference between his grandchildren and any others, and that the young count will not care; so, if this little woman here will but consider my proposal, why, the rix-dollars are still ready for her acceptance; and I can assure her, her children will have the chance to be better off in the world than ever she can make them."

"A chance, indeed," cried Gottfried, "and a very sorry chance, too. Why, Caspar, thou art the most deceitful and hard-hearted rogue that ever escaped the headsman. Go to; bad as I am, and doing many an ill deed at Count Hubert's bidding, yet I have more of the heart of a man and the conscience of a Christian in me yet, than to have a hand in such a game as thou proposest. You know well that your master's quest of these children bodes no good to the poor little things, if they should be found; and that though, to delude his foolish old uncle, the children may be admitted to him, they will be quietly removed afterwards. I have children of my own, and I would be very sorry to part with them to thee, or thy master either, friend Caspar."

"Ah, thou art a lamb of innocence, Gottfried," answered Caspar—"a fellow with a delicate conscience. I do expect that some day thou wilt become pious, turn out a veritable saint, and die in the odour of sanctity, as our friends the Papists here in Lucerne have it; but, in the mean time, do not spoil my bargain, but let this good woman once for all say will she part with the children!"

"Most certainly not!" replied Mrs. Rosen. "I have nothing to ask of you, friend, but to pursue your own way, and leave me to mine."

"Many thanks, mistress, for the permission to pursue my own way," returned Caspar. "Look you now, I wanted your way to be mine; but it is just like you perverse women, that you always will have a way of your own. Now I'll warrant if I had not offered to release you of two of your brats, you would have been prating of them as a great inconvenience. Be assured, my dear woman, the time will come when you will repent of your obstinacy; however, I cannot help it, and if you will needs send me further on my journey when it might end so profitably and pleasantly on this very spot, why, I must beg my comrade Gottfried just to fetch our horses, while I rest beneath the pleasant shade of this chestnut, and learn if this fantastic little woman will be as proof against a cup of this capital *eau-de-vie* as she is against the jolly rix-dollars!"

As he spoke thus, Master Caspar threw himself on the turf beneath the chestnut-tree, taking care, however, to keep a goodly distance between himself and Wolf, from whom the movement called forth an extra growl, for Wolf had evidently taken a strong aversion to this worthy, who offered rix-dollars in exchange for children. Mrs. Rosen, however, rejected the brandy which Caspar offered her from a most capacious leather bottle, as pertinaciously as she had declined the money; and with a grumbling oath at what he called her unsocial temper, Caspar rose, after taking a deep draught himself, and prepared to mount one of the two horses, which his companion now brought from the interior of the ruins. When he had one foot in the stirrup, however, he paused, and, pointing to little Gertrude, who stood trembling beside Mrs. Rosen, he said,—

"Strangle me, Gottfried, but I have a mind to carry off these two urchins by force of arms. How well that golden-headed girl might pass for the child of our little Countess Helena, dead and gone so many a year, poor thing; and the boy, too, is such a noble-looking fellow!"

"Ay, ay, comrade," replied the better-disposed Gottfried, "the children are too pretty and too good to be made subject to your mercies, or our master's either. Come, good fellow, the day is wearing on, and we are wasting time about the real purpose of our journey, and you know Count Hubert does not love delay."

"True, true!" answered Caspar, at length mounting his horse; "but this tiresome woman might have saved us the trouble of going further, and neither Hubert nor the old count been a bit the wiser for the cheat."

So saying, the excellent Master Caspar finally rode off in the direction of Lucerne, to the immense relief of Mrs. Rosen, and not less to that of the poor children, who had been thoroughly terrified by his brutal manner, and proposal to separate them from their protectress.

"How good it was of you!" said Gertrude, raising her blue eyes, full of tears, to the face of Mrs. Rosen, "not to let that bad man take us away for his money."

"I would not have gone!" exclaimed Conrad; "I would have fought him rather than go, and Wolf would have helped me, for Wolf did not like his looks any more than we did!"

"I fear, indeed, my dear children, that he is a bad man," said Mrs. Rosen, "and upon no account would I have parted with you to him,—or, indeed, to any one save good Father Werner; and now, as the worst heat is past, we had better go on our journey, for I wish to reach the town where we shall sleep by sunset."

During the remainder of that day Mrs. Rosen seemed possessed with a strange anxiety, gazing sadly on the two children, or looking fearfully back if she heard travellers approaching from the direction of Lucerne. She told Conrad that she was more than ever desirous to see him and his sister safe under the care of Father Werner; but she did not mention her suspicion that he and his sister were, by a strange chance, the very children of whom the ruffian Caspar was in search with such evident ill intents.

CHAPTER VI.

SOME weeks had passed, and we find our Little Wanderers no longer straying either alone among their wild and free mountains, or in more frequented districts under the guardianship of a poor woman who herself sorely needed protection. No; their condition is far more pitiable now than even in the hour when the avalanche, directed by the Divine power, which governs alike the tempest and the calm, overwhelmed their beloved home at Niederwahl. Far more bitter, far more terrible were the present calamities which visited those poor children; for their sufferings came not direct from the Supreme! —man is made the instrument of chastisement. The holy and suffering Job prayed that, in his trials, they might not be administered by the hand of man; and wisely did he pray, knowing how merciless is man in his wickedness and wrath. The Little Wanderers and their friend have journeyed long together,—many a fair and fertile, many a terrible and imposing scene of nature have they witnessed. The mighty waterfalls of Schaffhaussen,—the blue, spreading waters of Lake Constance, and then, after they passed the boundaries of their beloved Switzerland and entered Germany, the wild and rugged scenery of Suabia. But it is not in their wanderings among the dark woods or over the barren and desolate heath that their young hearts have learned to palpitate with sickening fears,—no, it is the sight of man and his cruelty that they dread.

It was a dreary night—though the spring was advancing into summer—a cold wind blew round the poor habitation where the children and their friend had found a shelter, and sheets of rain and hail, driven before the pitiless gust, beat through the broken roof and dismantled casements of the dwelling. Could they find no better shelter than a cottage, the furniture of which lies in a smouldering heap before the doorway, and the very walls of which are blackened by the action of a recent fire? Did not Mrs. Rosen set out on her perilous journey well supplied with money; and could she not in a whole village—and a large one, too—procure a better shelter than that furnished by the scorched walls of this empty cottage? Look with the poor, little, weeping Gertrude from the doorway of the hut, far more miserable than that in which she and Conrad had formerly rested in the neighbourhood of Altdorf! There is a lull in the storm, but the wind blows keenly and drives the clouds in dark eddies before it; the moon shines out from among them, but what a dismal scene is discovered by her pale light! Alas! the fire has not fastened only on that one cottage, the whole village has been delivered to the flames. Mrs. Rosen lies in that cottage, sick almost to death, and it has suffered less from the fire than any other in the village. The buildings are for the most part mere heaps of ruins; and here and there, where the fire has not been wholly extinguished by the rain, a tall tongue of flame shoots fitfully upwards. As the moon shines out so sadly, too, strange confused heaps may be seen scattered along the main street of the village; these heaps consist of broken and half-burned furniture, mingled, alas! not only with the bodies of slaughtered animals, but those of hale and vigorous men, struck down in their prime, and, worse still, of women and young children. Very ghastly and terrible do they look, with the white moonbeams shining on their whiter faces, many of them disfigured by the clotted blood which the rains had but partially washed away. How came that village burned, and those poor men and women murdered, with their children, on their own threshold? There is a war between two great sovereigns,—Frederick, the King of Prussia, and MariaTheresa, the Empress-Queen of Hungary—and all Germany is to be subject for years to spoil and devastation; and but three days before, a party of Prussian troops have passed through this unfortunate village, and it has been sacked and burned, and those of the poor inhabitants who were unable to find refuge in flight have been put to the sword. Poor Mrs. Rosen has been lying for a week ill of a fever. Some compassionate people of the village carried her out into the fields, when the enemy first appeared; but they could not pursue their flight encumbered with the sick woman, and were compelled to lay her down beneath the hedges. They offered to take Conrad and Gertrude along with them, and Mrs. Rosen herself begged that they would go, but the affectionate children would not abandon her; and the following morning, when the Prussians had passed on, and the flames subsided in the village, they, with much pain and difficulty, assisted the poor woman back to the half-demolished cottage. On a broken table to the right of the wretched bed which the poor children had contrived for Mrs. Rosen, lies a small form, very still and white; it is the pretty baby, which was so healthy and smiling when its mother commenced this sad journey; it has died that morning through the cold and exposure of the previous night.

The little Gertrude shudders and turns away her head, as the moonbeams light up the dreadful scene of the ruined village and its murdered inhabitants; then she says a prayer for the dead, and is about to return into the cottage, when Conrad steals softly to her side.

"The rain is over, Gertrude dear," said the boy; "but I do not like to leave you here all alone. Suppose that poor Mrs. Rosen should die too while I am gone?"

"Well, I should feel more frightened, to be sure, dear," said the little girl; "but we have nothing to give her, no bread, not even a drop of milk, and she must die if she has no food, and so must we, Conrad, for you know we have had only a little water today. Now, Dame Caroline told me the other day, before those wicked soldiers came, that this place is not a great many miles from Stutgard; and since all poor Mrs. Rosen's money has been taken away, and our mules driven off by those dreadful soldiers, why, we must all three die, Conrad dear, if we do not get money somewhere. It is so different now to what it was at dear old Niederwahl; nobody asked for money there, Conrad, or expected to be paid before they would help you to a meal. Now you know those pictures poor Lucilla gave us are still safe, and Mrs. Rosen told me those beautiful sparkling stones that are round them are what are called diamonds, and are worth a great deal of money, and I saw shops at Lucerne and Constance with just such things in the window; and, as we said today, some one most likely will buy the pretty stones, and let us keep the pictures, which are all we care for. So now go, dear Conrad, because the rain has quite stopped, and the moon shines quite bright, and you may be back by to-morrow morning, and I shall not be at all afraid, or at least only a very little."

In spite of this valorous counsel, however, the boy still lingered; and at last, kissing his sister, he said, "But could not you come with me, Gertrude dear?"

"And leave dear, good Mrs. Rosen, perhaps, to die all by herself?" said the little girl, with an unconscious heroism. "Oh, Conrad, I could not do that!"

Conrad hung his head; then he said, "Oh, Gertrude, I cannot leave you."

"And we shall all die if you stay," remarked the little girl. "Besides," she added, "you know I shall have Wolf for company."

"Ah!" returned the boy, "Wolf, poor old Wolf, I have not seen him all day; do you think those cruel soldiers have killed him, too?"

"I do not know," answered his sister. "I think not, for he was with us in the field last night, and indeed I have forgotten all about him till just now; he would never leave us of his own accord; and if he does not come back soon, he is either killed or stolen."

At this moment a deep sigh from Mrs. Rosen interrupted the conference of the two children, and on Gertrude hurrying to her side, she feebly asked for water. This poor refreshment, the only one at the command of the children, they hastened to supply. The sick woman drank eagerly, and then turning on her pallet, and closely clasping the hand of Gertrude, she sank into a calm sleep.

"Go now, dear Conrad," whispered the little girl, "go at once. I think she will get better. See how quietly she sleeps, and how bright the moon shines. Go now—you can be back in the morning."

"But to leave you, Gertrude dear, here all alone!" and Conrad involuntarily glanced at the dead infant.

"I am not afraid of poor baby," said the little girl; and the moonbeams, streaming over her pale face, showed the tears in her soft eyes. "Is it not an angel now, and helping us to offer prayers to our Blessed Lady and St. Gertrude, that they will pray for us?"

The boy made no answer; but, embracing his sister, he knelt a few minutes by her side, and then, as if by a sudden effort of resolution, rose up and passed out into the village.

CHAPTER VII.

THE moon still shone out brightly as Conrad, with hasty steps, made his way through the desolate village. More than once the poor boy stumbled over the ghastly remains of some slaughtered peasant; and the fears natural to his age, and from which, perhaps, a grown person might have been scarcely free, made him turn faint and sick, and feel his knees knock together. The remembrance, however, of his little Gertrude, and that she was left alone with the dead baby, and the perhaps dying Mrs. Rosen, inspired Conrad with new courage, and, turning his eyes from the sad scene around him, he stepped manfully on, and soon passed the boundaries of the village. Everywhere, as Conrad progressed, he perceived around him some evidence of the horrors of war—fields of the green corn trodden down, barns and hay-ricks committed to the flames, here and there a lonely cottage with smoke yet rising from its ruins, and, worse than all else, an occasional recurrence of such horrible sights as he had witnessed in the village, the mangled remains of some slain villager, or of a Prussian soldier.

Conrad had been informed of the direction in which lay the city of Stutgard, which was not more than ten miles distant from the village, and of that distance the hardy mountain-bred boy thought but little. The road, however, was a wearisome one to travel, the level ground being converted into a mere quagmire by the late rains, and the way occasionally leading through strips of copse, where the tall, dark fir-trees spread a gloom, through which the fitful rays of the moon but faintly penetrated. In passing through one of these patches of woodland, Conrad suddenly heard a crashing of boughs, accompanied by a joyful and well-known bark, and in another moment his old and faithful friend Wolf sprung from among the bushes, and almost overwhelmed him with caresses.

"Why, Wolf, dear old fellow, where have you been? Who could have thought it worth while to make a prisoner of you?" exclaimed the boy, when he found a remnant of strong cord remaining round the dog's neck—an evidence that he had been tied up, and had forcibly effected his escape, probably by gnawing his bonds.

Proceeding further into the wood, he came suddenly upon a little open space, at the extreme point of which stood a hut, apparently the abode of some forester. Lights gleamed through the rough planks that composed the walls; and as Conrad approached the dwelling, with the intent of asking if he was in a direct route for Stutgard, his ears were saluted by a volley of oaths and abusive exclamations, in a voice that seemed not unfamiliar to him; and on drawing sufficiently close to look through one of the wide chinks in the planking, he recognized, by the light of a pine-wood fire and of the lamp, that, with a flagon of drink, stood on a table, the two men, Caspar and Gottfried, whose demeanour had caused Mrs. Rosen so much alarm at the ruined convent near Lucerne.

The ruffian Caspar, who was evidently in an advanced stage of intoxication, was violently upbraiding his companion; and his first words excited in Conrad a curiosity which detained him looking through the chink, as it afterwards proved to his own peril, while the dog crouched at his feet and whined so piteously, that his own fury alone prevented Caspar overhearing.

"Whining hypocrite," "coward," and "fool," were the mildest epithets he applied to his companion. "Stupid and lazy thief," he said, in conclusion, "that I could not even trust you to keep the dog safe while I went to let Count Hubert know that those brats had turned up again, who, by the worst chance that ever happened to such a fellow as I am, slipped through my fingers when I passed them at Lucerne, and went on to seek them in the valley of Niederwahl, where the snows had buried all but those plaguy urchins, whom Count Hubert would give half his fortune to see fairly smothered. And now, forsooth, when we chanced upon the dog, who would have led us straight to the children, who cannot be far off from where he is, and I just run to the castle and tell Count Hubert I have a clue to the brats at last, you, to be sure, like an idle, droning, drinking fool, must tie the dog up outside the hut, and sit here swilling yourself blind and stupid, and let the brute escape."

"Let him escape!" retorted Gottfried, in as furious a tone as that used by his companion. "I was right glad to get rid of the brute. If he had burst the rope inside the hut instead of out of it, he would have torn me to pieces."

"So much the better," exclaimed Caspar; "the blood of such cowards as you is only fit for dogs to lap!"

"Who do you say that to, you murderous thief?" cried Gottfried. "Don't I know that you and your master have a plot between you to cut the throats of the two poor children if you can lay hands on them: and that it was along of your rascally Count Hubert that old Count Lobenstein would never see his daughter after she married the young Austrian, Captain Falkenberg, and that her poor children, to save their lives, were carried to the Swiss valley by Lucilla, and that, till within this year past, their own father did not know what had become of them. And now that Count Lobenstein repents of his sins, and has become a Catholic, and has seen Father Werner, and wants to leave his fortune, as he ought, to his grandchildren; his nephew, your scoundrelly master, sets you to work to waylay the poor things, and murder them!"

"Oh! oh! this is it, is it? You are going to repent too, and cant, and whine like the old Count, you milksop villain," cried Caspar. "But you see such womanish rogues do not suit either me or my master; and when tongues wag so freely they must be silenced!"

As Caspar spoke thus, he drew a sharp broad knife from his bosom, and sprung upon Gottfried. Luckily for the latter he slightly staggered under the influence of the drink, and thus enabled Gottfried to catch him by the wrist, and ward off the deadly blow; a terrible struggle ensued, for Caspar was a powerful man. They fell grasping each other; and poor Conrad, whose very terror chained him to the hiding-place, whence he witnessed the fray, only learned its result, when Caspar, loosing his hold of his late comrade, rolled heavily over, with the knife plunged almost to the hilt in his bosom, while Gottfried, rising with an aghast look, exclaimed:—"He is dead, he is dead! Well, Heaven knows it is his own fault. I only turned the knife upon him to save my own life. This is no biding-place for me though; for that villanous Count Hubert will be here soon, and I must not trust to his justice."

With these words Gottfried quitted the hut, the entrance to which was at the opposite side to that where Conrad was stationed; a moment, however, he paused on the threshold, and looking at the body of Caspar, mournfully exclaimed:—"I little thought Caspar that thou wast to die by my hand; may the Lord have mercy on thy sinful soul, and deal with thee in His goodness, rather than His justice, for never didst thou show mercy to a living thing!"

The door of the hut had closed on Gottfried, but still the poor boy Conrad stood frozen with horror, gazing on the frightful upturned face of the dead Caspar, as the flame from the fire played over it. He was roused by the whining of his faithful dog, and pondering deeply over what he had heard during the quarrel between Caspar and Gottfried, and on the last words of poor Lucilla, who had said that he and his sister would one day become great and rich, he pursued his way to Stutgard.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a lovely summer morning, and things wore something of their accustomed aspect in the town of Stutgard, for the adverse troops had withdrawn from its vicinity, and the good citizens, who cared not at all for the disputes between Frederick of Prussia and Maria Theresa, and a great deal about enjoying in peace the fruits of their industry, thanked Heaven for the withdrawal of the two armies, neither of which were commended to Heaven by them.

So well content, indeed, were the citizens with this release from the immediate presence of war, that they even found time to feel curious and interested respecting a couple of poor offenders against the civil laws, who were to be that morning examined before the Burgomaster. There were indeed some peculiar circumstances connected with both these prisoners; one of whom, accused of assassinating a comrade, was a sort of retainer of a certain nobleman of Wurtemberg, one Count Hubert von Lobenstein, whose castle and estates, or rather his uncle's, for Count Hubert was but the nephew of the count in possession, lay in the vicinity of Stutgard. The other prisoner was a boy, a mere child indeed, and a stranger in Stutgard, and stood charged with selling to a jeweller of the town some diamonds of great value, which this same Count Hubert of Lobenstein claimed as his property.

The beauty and intelligence of this poor child had been much commented on, and the circumstances under which he had committed the theft, and become implicated even with the supposed assassin, were represented as peculiarly painful and pitiable. There was a story of a little sister, and a poor soldier's wife, the protectress, if not mother, of the two children, and whom they had brought in almost a dying state to Stutgard, from one of the villages which had been laid waste by the soldiery. A pitiable story, indeed, it was, of how this poor boy had arrived, wet and footsore, at Stutgard, a little after daybreak, and prevailed upon a jeweller to advance him money upon the diamonds which made the costly setting of the miniature of a young and beautiful woman, which the child said was the portrait of his mother. Such strange poverty in those troublesome times, occasionally afflicted even the most distinguished families, that the jeweller took the boy's story for truth, and advancing him a portion of the price of the diamonds, bade him call in a day or two, when he would return him the portrait, and the rest of the amount due upon the diamonds. Then came the more pathetic part of the tale, how this poor boy had hired a conveyance to bring from the burned village where he had left them, his sister and the sick woman, their friend; and how when her brother reached the cottage, the little girl was almost spent for want of food, and the sick woman sunk in a lethargy, during which her poor dead baby was removed from the miserable hut and buried, and she herself conveyed to Stutgard, where she had expected to meet friends of whose names and abode the children were ignorant. In this distress, the boy had again visited the jeweller; but it seemed that in the interim, the miniature had been seen by the Count Hubert of Lobenstein who had claimed it as the likeness of his deceased cousin, the Countess Helena, and bade the jeweller, when the boy next visited his shop, detain him as a thief. This morning, then, the boy was to be examined before the Burgomaster, and it was intimated that the count meant to charge him with being implicated with Gottfried, the man who had slain his favourite, and, as the count said, faithful and honest servant Caspar.

These were terrible charges against a poor unknown boy, especially when advanced by a great and rich nobleman; but public opinion is very capricious, especially that of the women, who are very apt to be ruled by their hearts, rather than their reason: and what true female heart but would have been troubled by the story of these two forlorn children. The little feeble girl, called on to show the courage and firmness of a woman, and not failing in the task, but watching, after her brother had left her, all the dreary night beside her insensible friend, with the little dead baby beside her, and more than one poor peasant lying murdered in the village. And then the boy, with the determination of a youth of twenty, traversing alone and at night so many weary miles, a country devastated by war, to obtain the means to succour his little sister and their sick friend.

All these stories had quite melted the hearts of the wives and daughters of the townspeople of Stutgard; and the consequence was, that on the morning of the examination, the court was crowded with spectators long before the Burgomaster had taken his seat.

The interest felt by the female portion of the community in behalf of the younger prisoner was by no means lessened when the child was brought into the court; for there was a look of noble candour in his face, and a seriousness in his bearing, which was the furthest thing apart from the bold bravado sometimes assumed by the guilty. The poor boy was placed at a kind of bar, facing the seat of the Burgomaster; and it was then observed that a huge shaggy dog, of the breed of Mount St. Bernard, had followed the boy into the court, and now crouched at his feet, looking up at him with a kind of wonder in his sagacious countenance, as though he would fain have inquired the meaning of the crowd and the buzz of voices.

When the Burgomaster entered, being a functionary fully sensible of his own importance, and withal not troubled with any undue tenderness of heart, to interfere with the rigour of his justice, he somewhat sternly inquired of the jailor wherefore the dog had been permitted to enter the court, commanding at the same time that he should be removed. From this task, the jailor would fain have excused himself, as the dog, no other than our old friend Wolf, growled and showed a most formidable set of fangs, when the man attempted to separate him from his master. Then a gentleman, who had been accommodated with a seat beside that of the magistrate, and whose rich attire rather rendered conspicuous a tall but ungainly person, and a most ill-favoured and sinister countenance, benevolently suggested, that as the brute appeared both obstinate and dangerous, it would be well if his excellency the Burgomaster gave orders for one of the officials to blow out his brains on the spot.

At this cruel proposal, the poor boy threw his arms round the neck of his faithful four-footed friend, while his pale face flushed, and he turned upon the great gentleman a look which might have made the latter uncomfortable, had the strength of the little prisoner to punish such cruelty been equal to his will. The jailor, too, spoke in behalf of the poor animal, addressed himself to the Burgomaster, and not to the officious gentleman, who, in spite of the high degree which admitted him to such close companionship with the magistrate, seemed to be no favourite with the people, if an inference might be drawn from the lowering looks and muttered observations which his very appearance in the court elicited, and the peal of applause which broke forth when the jailor pressed his excellency to allow the dog to stay. "Poor brute," said the man, "he has watched at the gate of the prison day and night since we had this boy Conrad brought there; he will do no harm, your excellency."

"Oh, no, no! indeed, dear, kind gentlemen, our poor Wolf will do no harm. Oh, do not order him to be killed. He has travelled with us all the long, long way from our dear Niederwahl, and oh, I wish we were there with him again—that we had never come to this cruel, wicked country. But oh, do not kill poor Wolf! oh, do not kill him!"

The sweet voice in which this appeal was made, though broken by sobs, and the seraph-like beauty of the little girl, who with her hands clasped, her blue eyes streaming with tears, and her bright golden hair falling in disorder about her shoulders, rushed through the opening crowd to make this address to the Burgomaster, partially softened even that severe functionary, who, gruffly bidding her be quiet, said that the dog might remain, adding in the same tone,

"Poor urchins! one would never suspect depravity hidden under their innocent looks. So young and so pretty and so tender-hearted, even of their dog!"

"Pshaw!" snappishly exclaimed the richly-clad gentleman, who had suggested the shooting of poor Wolf. "I do wonder that your excellency should be so imposed upon. Tender-hearted of their dog, forsooth! Why, no doubt, the ferocious brute is the best defender the little thieves have got; besides, they are most likely set on by abler knaves than themselves, of whom I believe my scoundrelly servant Gottfried to have been one. I wonder that a judge of your excellency's great talent and discernment can be overcome for a moment by such weak feelings of compassion."

"True, true, Count Hubert," responded the Burgomaster, quite shamed out of his pity for the poor children by the well-directed compliment to his sagacity. "Yes, yes; I have no doubt you are right, and that we shall find these children of the worst class of juvenile offenders." Then, turning to Conrad, he sternly demanded how he became possessed of the portrait of a great lady, all set in diamonds, he, a poor boy, wandering the country without friends or a house.

"The portrait was given to me by my nurse, Lucilla," answered Conrad, boldly; "and she said it was the picture of my mother."

"And what is your name, my boy? and who was this Lucilla? and where do you come from?" said the Burgomaster.

"I came from dear, dear Switzerland," replied Conrad, bursting into tears, and answering first the last question. "My name is Conrad, and we lived, I and Gertrude, oh, so happily, in the valley of Niederwahl, in the district of Mount St. Gothard, with our nurse, our good Lucilla; but Lucilla was ill, and she gave us the portraits of our parents, and said we were to go to Father Werner at Altdorf, and then, while we had left her to go a little distance for some fruit, the avalanche fell, and buried all the cottages; and poor Gertrude and I walked a long journey, and when we got to Altdorf, Mr. Werner was not there; so we still travelled on, with good Mrs. Rosen, to find him here in Germany. And then Mrs. Rosen fell ill, and her baby died, and the Prussian soldiers came and burned the village; and I found my way to this city, and sold some of the diamonds, and brought Mrs. Rosen and Gertrude here with the money; and when I went to the jeweller for the rest of the money, I was taken up for a thief, and put in prison, where I have been kept a week. But the picture was my own; it was given to me by Lucilla, and oh, that we were living with her again in the valley, and had never come to this false and wicked city, where I am put into a prison, and called a thief for selling my own diamonds to buy bread for my sister and our sick friend!"

"A very pretty story, indeed," said the Burgomaster's clerk, who had been excellently well paid to look on only one side of the case; "a very pretty story indeed, Master Conrad. And pray, what else is your name, beside Conrad?"

"I do not know," answered the boy; "but Lucilla told us that our parents were great people; and that we should have been rich, but for some person who had injured both us and our parents."

"Better and better," replied the clerk. "Why, you wicked urchin, do you pretend to say that you do not know your own name? A likely story! And your parents were very great and rich, were they? And the picture of the beautiful lady, with the diamonds round it, was the picture of your mother! Come, come, my lad," continued the functionary, suddenly changing his ironical tone for one of menace, and darting a terrible look on poor Conrad, "own the truth at once, it will be better for you; confess now, this Lucilla you talk of, was your mother, and that the picture with the diamonds was given to you by the man Gottfried, who cruelly murdered his comrade, Caspar, in the wood."

"Lucilla was not my mother," reiterated Conrad firmly. "She said she was not, and she never spoke falsely. She gave me the picture; and the man Gottfried, who they tell me is in prison, did not cruelly murder his comrade Caspar; Caspar took out a knife and tried to stab him first. I saw it all through the chinks in the hut where the man was killed."

"Oh, you saw it all, did you?" said the clerk. "And pray what had you to do with stopping to spy on these men?"

"Because," answered Conrad, "I remember meeting them at Lucerne, when Caspar wanted to buy me and Gertrude from Mrs. Rosen; and Caspar was a bad man, and from what he said the night he was killed, I believe he knew a great deal about us."

"And so, you little villain, the character of the poor murdered man is to depend on your story," cried the clerk; "and you fancy that your stupid improbable tale will pass upon your own telling. But there is another story to be told, and my honourable friend the Burgomaster, and all the worthy persons here present, will hear what the noble Count Hubert von Lobenstein has to say."

Poor Conrad, who, from what he had overheard on the night when Caspar was killed, had become aware that in this Count Hubert, both he and his sister had an enemy to dread, did not feel his apprehensions lessened when the richly-dressed and sinister-looking gentleman, who it now appeared was Count Hubert himself, rose, and with a great deal of pretended compassion for the poor deluded children, as he called them, entered into a long and not very intelligible story of his uncle, the old Count Lobenstein, and his cousin the Countess Helena, who had, it seemed, some twelve or thirteen years before, so grievously offended her father by marrying a poor captain in the Austrian service, who, to the still greater indignation of the old count, was a Catholic, the Lobenstein family being Protestants, that in a fit of fury he had dismissed her from his castle. Captain Falkenberg, the lady's husband, had, it seemed, fallen into disgrace with the imperial government, and was believed to be either dead or imprisoned in one of the state fortresses, as he had not been heard of since the second year of his marriage, when he left his wife at a cottage which they had purchased at Lake Constance, in Switzerland, and journeyed into Austria, whence he never returned. The lady, as it appeared, died a year or two later, still unreconciled to her father; and her children, of which she had two, were, by Count Hubert's account, dead also. The wretch Caspar he represented as the most honest and faithful of servants, and flatly denied every tittle of the story told by Conrad, swearing that the portrait of the Countess Helena was his own property, and had been stolen from him by Gottfried. His object evidently was to procure the execution of Gottfried, and perpetual imprisonment for the poor boy as a thief.

At the conclusion of the count's narration, Conrad was asked what proofs and what witnesses he could produce of the truth of his version of the story. But his only friend, Mrs. Rosen, was lying in a state of insensibility, and Father Werner was not known in Stutgard. The Burgomaster was particularly severe upon the turpitude of a poor boy, who, to disprove the charge of theft upon himself, dared impute falsehood to a great nobleman; and even the people in the court, though most of them believing Conrad's tale rather than Count Hubert's, began to fear that, though innocent, the mere letter of the law would inflict on him the punishment of the guilty.

Little Gertrude, meanwhile, who had been permitted very closely to approach the judgment-seat, and had listened in breathless attention to the examination of her brother and the story of the count, now, as the Burgomaster was about to pass his sentence, held up her hands and earnestly prayed permission to speak. This permission the hard-hearted and dishonest clerk, who had indeed been paid by Count Hubert to strain the evidence against Conrad, would fain have refused; but the fair and innocent countenance of Gertrude had touched the heart of the old Burgomaster, and he granted her request. The thought of speaking before so many persons then partially startled the timid little girl; but overcoming that fear, in her hope of rescuing Conrad, she said,—

"Is it not sworn by this gentleman, Count Hubert, that the picture could never have been given to us by Lucilla?"

"It was stolen from my cabinet not a fortnight ago," said the count. "I missed it the morning after my poor servant Caspar was found murdered."

"Just that picture the count missed!" exclaimed Gertrude.

"Just that picture only!" said the count.

"Then," cried the little girl, as with trembling fingers she loosed a ribbon from her neck, and held up to view the miniature of her father,—"then the gentleman cannot say that this picture was stolen from him—this picture, which Lucilla said was that of my father, and which she hung round my neck the day that she gave the other portrait to Conrad!"

A buzz of delight and surprise ran through the court, above which was heard the voices of the officers desiring the crowd to make way for witnesses, who had to appear in behalf of the accused boy. The Count of Lobenstein, who had been for a moment confused by the production of the second portrait, now, with a reckless bravado, would have still maintained that the picture of the Countess Helena had been stolen from him, but he was interrupted by the strangers who had just entered the court, while, at the same time, the prisoner Gottfried was brought in. The strangers were three in number; two of whom were soldiers in the Austrian uniform; of these, one was a serjeant, the other evidently an officer of high rank; the third stranger wore the garb of a Catholic ecclesiastic.

The officer, a man of noble appearance, passed towards the bar; and then the Count of Lobenstein turned pale, and the Burgomaster, his clerk, and others, recognized in the stranger the original of the portrait which Gertrude had just shown.

"Forbear, Hubert of Lobenstein!" said this person to the count, "to disgrace your rank and stain your soul with further perjuries! Your cruel treacheries are at last revealed, and the goodness of Heaven has permitted me to arrive in time to defeat your base project for destroying my innocent children, whom the faithful Lucilla and this good priest, Father Werner, rescued from you at the time of their mother's death. Insolence and equivocation, Count Lobenstein, are equally vain—all is discovered. I know that you were the author of the false charges which confined me for eleven years in a dungeon; I know that, through your intrigues, and those of Mrs. Steibelt, the bad sister of this worthy man, my poor Helena died unforgiven by her father; I know, furthermore, that since Count Lobenstein has embraced the Catholic faith, he has doubted your story, that his grandchildren were dead, and that, in company with this now repentant sinner, Gottfried, you sent the infamous Caspar to seek out my poor children and murder them. How futile has been all your wickedness, Hubert of Lobenstein! The supreme mercy of Providence has defeated your malignity at every turn. I have been honourably released by my sovereign. I am now the Count of Falkenberg, with lands and honours in such abundance, that I seek only for my children the blessing of Count Lobenstein, and am indifferent to his wealth, for which you have risked your soul."

While the Count of Falkenberg spoke thus, rage and shame seemed to struggle for the mastery in Count Hubert's breast; then, as if at a loss for a theme of insult, he bade the count beware how he, a noble of the empire, came across the troops of Frederick of Prussia.

"Wretch!" exclaimed Falkenberg, "presume not to suppose that the great mind of Frederick would descend to the meanness of thy malice. I have a pass from the king of Prussia, which secures me from all hindrance on the part of his armies while in search of my children. Oh, Lobenstein! your malice has, indeed, overreached itself; for your cruelty to my noble boy has made his name the topic of Stutgard, and was the means of instructing me, with my good friends here, Father Werner and Serjeant Rosen, where he and his sister were to be found; and better still even than this it is that I find them worthy of their high condition, while in these pictures, by means of which you would have destroyed them, lie concealed the certificate of my marriage with their mother."

As Count Falkenberg spoke he took the portrait from Gertrude, and, pressing the spring at the back, drew forth the parchment. The wicked and miserable Count of Lobenstein had no more to say; but, folding his arms, he dropped his head on his breast, and heard without reply, the command which his friend the Burgomaster was compelled to give, that he should be placed in confinement till the pleasure of the Duke of Wurtemberg respecting him should be known. Count Hubert, however, was never tried for his offences; shame and rage at the discovery and defeat of his projects threw him into a fever, of which he died in prison.

As for the man Gottfried, after the appearance of Count Falkenberg, neither the Burgomaster nor his clerk expressed any doubts as to the truth of Conrad's account of the manner in which Caspar had been killed. Gottfried was therefore set at liberty, and being taken into the service of Count Falkenburg, endeavoured to make amends for his former misdeeds by leading a better life.

But the "Little Wanderers," wanderers no more, but the heirs of two wealthy noblemen, the idolized grandchildren of Count Lobenstein, who lived for some years after they were restored to their father, who loved them more wisely, though not less, and who never so much congratulated himself on their excellent dispositions, as when witness of the indiscreet fondness of the old count.

Conrad and Gertrude, however, were not to be spoiled, and the young count and countess, clad in costly velvets and embroidered silks, with liveried attendants to anticipate their slightest wish, were as cheerful, as kind, and as unassuming as the two poor children of the valley of Niederwahl.

Did they forget their old friends, too? No; a stone cross on the spot where once smiled the Swiss valley, and a marble tablet in the chapel of Falkenberg Castle, alike recorded the virtues and devotion of Lucilla. Mrs. Rosen, too, she recovered from her dangerous illness, and another baby, named Conrad, after the young count, replaced the infant she had lost: the fortunes of this boy became the care of the Falkenberg family, not more because the father, Serjeant Rosen, was a brave soldier, under Count Falkenberg's own command, than that the good mother had taken the children of the count under her protection; neither was her kind sister Catherine forgotten. As for Father Werner, he went to live at Falkenberg; and his sister, Mrs. Steibelt, though not left without the means of existence, was sufficiently punished by the contempt and aversion with which even her excellent brother regarded her, for the share which she had borne in the wicked machinations of Count Hubert.

And Wolf!—dear, faithful, honest, valorous old Wolf!—without whom the "Little Wanderers" had never accomplished their perilous journey! Why, he was made a very king, an emperor of dogs; he took precedence of all others of the canine race at Falkenberg Castle, and had the privilege of *entrée*, not only of the great hall and the withdrawing-room, but the bower chamber of the young countess.

Wolf lived long to enjoy his honours: he became a patriarch of dogs; and the story runs that, when he was well advanced in years, the Countess Gertrude rejected the offered hand of a wealthy magnate of Hungary, and accepted that of a cadet of the house of Lichtenstein, because the former had spurned, and the latter had caressed, her dear old Wolf! This, too, with the consent of her father, and Count Conrad, her brother, and when she was the leading *belle* of the court of Maria Theresa.

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